

M I C H A E L
M O O R C O O K

THE WEIRD OF THE
WHITE WOLF

BOOK THREE OF THE ELRIC SAGA



The Weird of the White Wolf

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Book 3 of Elric Saga

Prologue

THE DREAM OF EARL AUBEC

In which we learn something of how the Age of the Young Kingdoms emerged and of the part played by the Dark Lady, Myshella, whose fate would later be intertwined with that of Elric of Melniboné . . .

From the glassless window of the stone tower it was possible to see the wide river winding off between loose, brown banks, through the heaped terrain of solid green copses which blended very gradually into the mass of the forest proper. And out of the forest, the cliff rose grey and light-green, up and up, the rock darkening, lichen-covered, to merge with the lower and even more massive, stones of the castle. It was the castle which dominated the countryside in three directions, drawing the eye from river, rock, or forest. Its walls were high and of thick granite, with towers; a dense field of towers, grouped so as to shadow one another.

Aubec of Malador marvelled and wondered how human builders could ever have constructed it, save by sorcery. Brooding and mysterious, the castle seemed to have a defiant air, for it stood on the very edge of the world.

At this moment the lowering sky cast a strange, deep-yellow light against the western side of the towers, intensifying the blackness untouched by it. Huge billows of blue sky rent the general racing greyness above, and mounds of red cloud crept through to blend and produce more and subtler colourings. Yet, though the sky was impressive, it could not take the gaze away from the ponderous series of man-made crags that were Castle Kaneloon.

Earl Aubec of Malador did not turn from the window until it was completely dark outside the forest, cliff, and castle but shadowy tones against the overall blackness. He passed a heavy-knotted hand over his almost bald scalp and thoughtfully went towards the heap of straw which was his intended bed.

The straw was piled in a niche created by a buttress and the outer wall and the room was well-lighted by Malador's lantern. But the air was cold as he lay down on the straw with his hand close to the two-handed broadsword of prodigious size. This was his only weapon. It looked as if it had been forged for a giant—Malador was virtually that himself—with its wide crosspiece and heavy, stone-encrusted hilt and five-foot blade, smooth and broad. Beside it was Malador's old, heavy armour, the casque balanced on top with its somewhat tattered black plumes waving slightly in a current of air from the window.

Malador slept.

His dreams, as usual, were turbulent; of mighty armies surging across the blazing landscapes, curling banners bearing the blazons of a hundred nations, forests of shining lance tips, seas of tossing helmets, the brave, wild blasts of the war-horns, the clatter of hooves and the songs and cries and shouts of soldiers. These were dreams of earlier times, of his youth when, for Queen Eloarde of Klant, he had conquered all the Southern nations—almost to the edge of the world. Only Kaneloon, on the very edge, had he not conquered, and that because no army would follow him there.

For one of so martial an appearance, these dreams were surprisingly unwelcome, and Malador woke several times that night, shaking his head in an attempt to rid himself of them.

He would rather have dreamed of Eloarde, though she was the cause of his restlessness; but he saw nothing of her in his sleep; nothing of her soft, black hair that billowed around her pale face, nothing of her green eyes and red lips and her proud, disdainful posture. Eloarde had assigned him to this quest and he had not gone willingly, though he had no choice, for as well as his mistress she was also his Queen. The Champion was traditionally her lover—and it was unthinkable to Earl Aubec that any other condition should exist. It was his place, as Champion of Klant, to obey and go forth from her palace to seek Castle Kaneloon alone and conquer it and declare it part of her Empire, so that it could be said

Queen Eloarde's domain stretched from the Dragon Sea to World's Edge.

Nothing lay beyond World's Edge—nothing save the swirling stuff of unformed Chaos which stretched away from the Cliffs of Kaneloon for eternity, roiling and broiling, multicoloured, full of monstrous half-shapes—for Earth alone was Lawful and constituted ordered matter, drifting in the sea of Chaos-stuff as it had done for aeons.

In the morning, Earl Aubec of Malador extinguished the lantern which he had allowed to remain alight, drew greaves and hauberk on to him, placed his black plumed helm upon his head, put his broadsword over his shoulder and sallied out of the stone tower which was all that remained whole of some ancient edifice.

His leathern-shod feet stumbled over stones that seemed partially dissolved, as if Chaos had once lapped here instead of against the towering Cliffs of Kaneloon. That, of course, was quite impossible, since Earth's boundaries were known to be constant.

Castle Kaneloon had seemed closer the night before and that, he now realised, was because it was so huge. He followed the river, his feet sinking in the loamy soil, the green branches of the trees shading him from the increasingly hot sun as he made his way toward the cliffs. Kaneloon was now out of sight, high above him. Every so often he used his sword as an axe to clear his way through the places where the foliage was particularly thick.

He rested several times, drinking the cold water of the river and mopping his face and head. He was unhurried, he had no wish to visit Kaneloon, he resented the interruption to his life with Eloarde which he thought he had earned. Also he, too, had a superstitious dread of the mysterious castle, which was said to be inhabited only by one human occupant—the Dark Lady, a sorceress without mercy who commanded a legion of demons and other Chaos creatures.

He regarded the cliffs at midday and regarded the path leading upward with a mixture of wariness and relief. He had expected to have to scale the cliffs. He was not one, however, to take a difficult route where an easy one presented itself, so he looped a cord around his sword and slung it over his back, since it was too long and cumbersome to carry at his side. Then, still in bad humour, he began to climb the twisting path.

The lichen-covered rocks were evidently ancient, contrary to the speculations of certain philosophers who asked why Kaneloon had only been heard of a few generations since Malador believed in the general answer to this question—that explorers had never ventured this far until fairly recently. He glanced back down the path and saw the tops of the trees below him, their foliage moving slightly in the breeze. The tower in which he'd spent the night was just visible in the distance and, beyond that, he knew, there was no civilisation, no outpost of Man for many days' journey North, East, or West—can Chaos lay to the South? He had never been so close to the edge of the world before and wondered how the sight of unformed matter would affect his brain.

At length he clambered to the top of the cliff and stood, arms akimbo, staring up at Castle Kaneloon which soared a mile away, its highest towers hidden in the clouds, its immense walls rooted on the rock and stretching away, limited on both sides only by the edge of the cliff. And, on the other side of the cliff, Malador watched the churning, leaping Chaos substance, predominantly grey, blue, brown, and yellow at this moment, though its colour changed constantly, spew like the sea-spray a few feet from the castle.

He became filled with a feeling of such indescribable profundity that he could only remain

in this position for a long while, completely overwhelmed by a sense of his own insignificance. It came to him, eventually, that if anyone did dwell in the Castle Kaneloon, then they must have a robust mind or else must be insane, and then he sighed and strode on towards his goal, noting that the ground was perfectly flat, without blemish, green, obsidian, and reflecting imperfectly the dancing Chaos-stuff from which he averted his eyes as much as he could.

Kaneloon had many entrances, all dark and unwelcoming, and had they all not been of regular size and shape they might have been so many cave-mouths.

Malador paused before choosing which to take, and then walked with outward purposefulness towards one. He went into blackness which appeared to stretch away forever. It was cold; it was empty and he was alone.

He was soon lost. His footsteps made no echo, which was unexpected; then the blackness began to give way to a series of angular outlines, like the walls of a twisting corridor—walls which did not reach the unsensed roof, but ended several yards above his head. It was a labyrinth, a maze. He paused and looked back and saw with horror that the maze wound on in many directions, though he was sure he had followed a straight path from the outside.

For an instant, his mind became diffused and madness threatened to engulf him, but he batted it down, unslung his sword, shivering. Which way? He pressed on, unable to tell now, whether he went forward or backward.

The madness lurking in the depths of his brain filtered out and became fear and immediately following the sensation of fear, came the shapes. Swift-moving shapes, darting from several different directions, gibbering, fiendish, utterly horrible.

One of these creatures kept at him and he struck at it with his blade. It fled, but seemed unwounded. Another came and another and he forgot his panic as he smote around him driving them back until all had fled. He paused and leaned, panting, on his sword. Then, as he stared around him, the fear began to flood back into him and more creatures appeared—creatures with wide, blazing eyes and clutching talons, creatures with malevolent faces mocking him, creatures with half-familiar faces, some recognisable as those of old friends and relatives, yet twisted into horrific parodies. He screamed and ran at them, whirling his huge sword, slashing, hacking at them, rushing past one group to turn a bend in the labyrinth and encounter another.

Malicious laughter coursed through the twisting corridors, following him and preceding him as he ran. He stumbled and fell against a wall. At first the wall seemed of solid stone, then, slowly it became soft and he sank through it, his body lying half in one corridor, half in another. He hauled himself through, still on hands and knees, looked up and saw Eloarde, but an Eloarde whose face grew old as he watched.

“I am mad,” he thought. *“Is this reality or fantasy—or both?”*

He reached out a hand, *“Eloarde!”*

She vanished but was replaced by a crowding horde of demons. He raised himself to his feet and flailed around him with his blade, but they skipped outside his range and he roared at them as he advanced. Momentarily, while he thus exerted himself, the fear left him again, and, with the disappearance of the fear, so the visions vanished until he realised that the fear preceded the manifestations and he tried to control it.

He almost succeeded, forcing himself to relax, but it welled up again and the creatures bubbled out of the walls, their shrill voices full of malicious mirth.

This time he did not attack them with his sword, but stood his ground as calmly as he could and concentrated upon his own mental condition. As he did so, the creatures began to fade away and then the walls of the labyrinth dissolved and it seemed to him that he stood in a peaceful valley, calm and idyllic. Yet, hovering close to his consciousness, he seemed to see the walls of the labyrinth faintly outlined, and disgusting shapes moving here and there along the many passages.

He realised that the vision of the valley was as much an illusion as the labyrinth and, with this conclusion, both valley and labyrinth faded and he stood in the enormous hall of a castle which could only be Kaneloon.

The hall was unoccupied though well-furnished, and he could not see the source of the light, which was bright and even. He strode towards a table, on which were heaped scrolls and his feet made a satisfying echo. Several great metal-studded doors led off from the hall but for the moment he did not investigate them, intent on studying the scrolls and seeing if they could help him unravel Kaneloon's mystery.

He propped his sword against the table and took up the first scroll.

It was a beautiful thing of red vellum, but the black letters upon it meant nothing to him and he was astounded for, though dialects varied from place to place, there was only one language in all the lands of the Earth. Another scroll bore different symbols still, and a third he unrolled carried a series of highly stylised pictures which were repeated here and there so that he guessed they formed some kind of alphabet. Disgusted, he flung the scroll down, picked up his sword, drew an immense breath, and shouted:

“Who dwells here? Let them know that Aubec, Earl of Malador, Champion of Klant and Conqueror of the South claims this castle in the name of Queen Eloarde, Empress of all the Southlands!”

In shouting these familiar words, he felt somewhat more comfortable, but he received no reply. He lifted his casque a trifle and scratched his neck. Then he picked up his sword, balanced it over his shoulder, and made for the largest door.

Before he reached it, it sprang open and a huge, manlike thing with hands like grappling irons grinned at him.

He took a pace backward and then another until, seeing that the thing did not advance, he stood his ground observing it.

It was a foot or so taller than he, with oval, multi-faceted eyes that, by their nature, seemed blank. Its face was angular and had a grey, metallic sheen. Most of its body was comprised of burnished metal, jointed in the manner of armour. Upon its head was a tight-fitting hood, studded with brass. It had about it an air of tremendous and insensate power though it did not move.

“A golem!” Malador exclaimed for it seemed to him that he remembered such man-made creatures from legends. “What sorcery created *you!*”

The golem did not reply but its hands—which were in reality comprised of four spikes of metal apiece—began slowly to flex themselves; and still the golem grinned.

This thing, Malador knew, did not have the same amorphous quality of his earlier vision. This was solid, this was real and strong, and even Malador's manly strength, however much

he exerted it, could not defeat such a creature. Yet neither could he turn away.

With a scream of metal joints, the golem entered the hall and stretched its burnished hand towards the earl.

Malador could attack or flee, and fleeing would be senseless. He attacked.

His great sword clasped in both hands, he swung it sideways at the golem's torso, which seemed to be its weakest point. The golem lowered an arm and the sword shuddered against metal with a mighty clang that set the whole of Malador's body quaking. He stumbled backward. Remorselessly, the golem followed him.

Malador looked back and searched the hall in the hope of finding a weapon more powerful than his sword, but saw only shields of an ornamental kind upon the wall to his right. He turned and ran to the wall, wrenching one of the shields from its place and slipping it on his arm. It was an oblong thing, very light, and comprising several layers of cross-grained wood. It was inadequate, but it made him feel a trifle better as he whirled again to face the golem.

The golem advanced, and Malador thought he noticed something familiar about it, just as the demons of the labyrinth had seemed familiar, but the impression was only vague. If Kaneloon's weird sorcery was affecting his mind, he decided.

The creature raised the spikes on its right arm and aimed a swift blow at Malador's head. He avoided it, putting up his sword as protection. The spikes clashed against the sword and then the left arm pistoned forward, driving at Malador's stomach. The shield stopped the blow, though the spikes pierced it deeply. He yanked the buckler off the spikes, slashing at the golem's leg-joints as he did so.

Still staring into the middle-distance, with apparently no real interest in Malador, the golem advanced like a blind man as the earl turned and leapt on to the table, scattering the scrolls. Now he brought his huge sword down upon the golem's skull, and the brass studs sparked and the hood and head beneath it was dented. The golem staggered and then grasped the table, heaving it off the floor so that Malador was forced to leap to the ground. This time he made for the door and tugged at its latch-ring, but the door would not open.

His sword was chipped and blunted. He put his back to the door as the golem reached him and brought its metal hand down on the top edge of the shield. The shield shattered and a dreadful pain shot up Malador's arm. He lunged at the golem, but he was unused to handling the big sword in this manner and the stroke was clumsy.

Malador knew that he was doomed. Force and fighting skill were not enough against the golem's insensate strength. At the golem's next blow he swung aside, but was caught by one of its spike-fingers which ripped through his armour and drew blood, though at that moment he felt no pain.

He scrambled up, shaking away the grip and fragments of wood which remained of the shield, grasping his sword firmly.

"The soulless demon has no weak spot," he thought, *"and since it has no true intelligence, cannot be appealed to. What would a golem fear?"*

The answer was simple. The golem would only fear something as strong or stronger than itself.

He must use cunning.

He ran for the upturned table with the golem after him, leaped over the table and wheeled

as the golem stumbled but did not, as he'd hoped, fall. However, the golem was slowed by its encounter, and Aubec took advantage of this to rush for the door through which the golem had entered. It opened. He was in a twisting corridor, darkly shadowed, not unlike the labyrinth he had first found in Kaneloon. The door closed, but he could find nothing to bar his way with. He ran up the corridor as the golem tore the door open and came lumbering swiftly after him.

The corridor writhed about in all directions, and, though he could not always see the golem, he could hear it and had the sickening fear that he would turn a corner at some stage and run straight into it. He did not—but he came to a door and, upon opening it and passing through it, found himself again in the hall of Castle Kaneloon.

He almost welcomed this familiar sight as he heard the golem, its metal parts screeching, continue to come after him. He needed another shield, but the part of the hall in which he now found himself had no wall-shields—only a large, round mirror of bright, clear-polished metal. It would be too heavy to be much use, but he seized it, tugging it from its hook. It fell with a clang and he hauled it up, dragging it with him as he stumbled away from the golem which had emerged into the room once more.

Using the chains by which the mirror had hung, he gripped it before him and, as the golem's speed increased and the monster rushed upon him, he raised this makeshift shield.

The golem shrieked.

Malador was astounded. The monster stopped dead and cowered away from the mirror. Malador pushed it towards the golem and the thing turned its back and fled, with a metallic howl, through the door it had entered by.

Relieved and puzzled, Malador sat down on the floor and studied the mirror. There was certainly nothing magical about it, though its quality was good. He grinned and said aloud:

“The creature *is* afraid of something. It is afraid of itself!”

He threw back his head and laughed loudly in his relief. Then he frowned. “Now to find the sorcerers who created him and take vengeance on them!” He pushed himself to his feet, twisted the chains of the mirror more securely about his arm and went to another door, concerned lest the golem complete its circuit of the maze and return through the door. The door would not budge, so he lifted his sword and hacked at the latch for a few moments until it gave. He strode into a well-lit passage with what appeared to be another room at its far end—the door open.

A musky scent came to his nostrils as he progressed along the passage—the scent that reminded him of Eloarde and the comforts of Klant.

When he reached the circular chamber, he saw that it was a bedroom—a woman's bedroom full of the perfume he had smelled in the passage. He controlled the direction his mind took, thought of loyalty and Klant, and went to another door which led off from the room. He lugged it open and discovered a stone staircase winding upward. This he mounted, passing windows that seemed glazed with emerald or ruby, beyond which shadow-shapes flickered so that he knew he was on the side of the castle overlooking Chaos.

The staircase seemed to lead up into a tower, and when he finally reached the small door at its top he was feeling out of breath and paused before entering. Then he pushed the door open and went in.

A huge window was set in one wall, a window of clear glass through which he could see the ominous stuff of Chaos leaping. A woman stood by this window as if awaiting him.

"You are indeed a champion, Earl Aubec," said she with a smile that might have been ironic.

"How do you know my name?"

"No sorcery gave it me, Earl of Malador—you shouted it loudly enough when you first saw the hall in its true shape."

"Was not *that*, then, sorcery," he said ungraciously, "the labyrinth, the demons—even the valley? Was not the golem made by sorcery? Is not this whole cursed castle of a sorcerous nature?"

She shrugged. "Call it so if you'd rather not have the truth. Sorcery, in your mind at least, is a crude thing which only hints at the true powers existing in the universe."

He did not reply, being somewhat impatient of such statements. He had learned, by observing the philosophers of Klant, that mysterious words often disguised commonplace things and ideas. Instead, he looked at her sulkily and over-frankly.

She was fair, with green-blue eyes and a light complexion. Her long robe was of a similar colour to her eyes. She was, in a secret sort of way, very beautiful and, like all the denizens of Kaneloon he'd encountered, a trifle familiar.

"You recognise Kaneloon?" she asked.

He dismissed her question. "Enough of this—take me to the masters of this place!"

"There is none but me, Myshella the Dark Lady—and I am the mistress."

He was disappointed. "Was it just to meet you that I came through such perils?"

"It was—and greater perils even than you think, Earl Aubec. Those were but the monsters of your own imagination!"

"Taunt me not, lady."

She laughed. "I speak in good faith. The castle creates its defences out of your own mind. It is a rare man who can face and defeat his own imagination. Such a one has not found me here for two hundred years. All since have perished by fear—until now."

She smiled at him. It was a warm smile.

"And what is the prize for so great a feat?" he said gruffly.

She laughed again and gestured towards the window which looked out upon the edge of the world and Chaos beyond. "Out there nothing exists as yet. If you venture into it, you will be confronted again by creatures of your hidden fancy, for there is nothing else to behold."

She gazed at him admiringly and he coughed in his embarrassment. "Once in a while," she said, "there comes a man to Kaneloon who can withstand such an ordeal. Then may the frontiers of the world be extended, for when a man stands against Chaos it must recede and new lands spring into being!"

"So that is the fate you have in mind for me, sorceress!"

She glanced at him almost demurely. Her beauty seemed to increase as he looked at her. He clutched at the hilt of his sword, gripping it tight as she moved gracefully towards him and touched him, as if by accident. "There is a reward for your courage." She looked into his eyes and said no more of the reward, for it was clear what she offered. "And after—do my bidding and go against Chaos."

"Lady, know you not that ritual demands of Klant's Champion that he be the queen's

faithful consort? I would not betray my word and trust!" He gave a hollow laugh. "I came here to remove a menace to my queen's kingdom—not to be your lover and lackey!"

"There is no menace here."

"That seems true ..."

She stepped back as if appraising him anew. For her this was unprecedented—never before had her offer been refused. She rather liked this solid man who also combined courage and imagination in his character. It was incredible, she thought, how in a few centuries such traditions could grow up—traditions which could bind a man to a woman he probably did not even love. She looked at him as he stood there, his body rigid, his manner nervous.

"Forget Klant," she said, "think of the power you might have—the power of true creation."

"Lady, I claim this castle for Klant. That is what I came to do and that is what I do now. I leave here alive, I shall be judged the conqueror and you must comply."

She hardly heard him. She was thinking of various plans to convince him that her cause was superior to his. Perhaps she could still seduce him? Or use some drug to bewitch him? No, he was too strong for either, she must think of some other stratagem.

She felt her breasts heaving involuntarily as she looked at him. She would have preferred to have seduced him. It had always been as much her reward as the heroes who had earlier won over the dangers of Kaneloon. And then, she thought, she knew what to say.

"Think, Earl Aubec," she whispered. "Think—new lands for your queen's Empire!"

He frowned.

"Why not extend the Empire's boundaries farther?" she continued. "Why not *make* new territories?"

She watched him anxiously as he took off his helm and scratched his heavy, bald head. "You have made a point at last," he said dubiously.

"Think of the honours you would receive in Klant if you succeeded in winning not merely Kaneloon—but that which lies *beyond!*"

Now he rubbed his chin. "Aye," he said, "Aye ..." His great brows frowned deeply.

"New plains, new mountains, new seas—new populations, even—whole cities full of people fresh-sprung and yet with the memory of generations of ancestors behind them! All this can be done by *you*, Earl of Malador—for Queen Eloarde and Lormyr!"

He smiled faintly, his imagination fired at last. "Aye! If I can defeat such dangers here—then I can do the same out there! It will be the greatest adventure in history! My name will become a legend—Malador, Master of Chaos!"

She gave him a tender look, though she had half-cheated him.

He swung his sword up on to his shoulder. "I'll try this, lady."

She and he stood together at the window, watching the Chaos-stuff whispering and rolling for eternity before them. To her it had never been wholly familiar, for it changed all the time. Now its tossing colours were predominantly red and black. Tendrils of mauve and orange spiralled out of this and writhed away.

Weird shapes flitted about in it, their outlines never clear, never quite recognisable.

He said to her: "The Lords of Chaos rule this territory. What will they have to say?"

"They can say nothing, do little. Even they have to obey the Law of the Cosmic Balance which ordains that if man can stand against Chaos, then it shall be his to order and make Lawful. Thus the Earth grows, slowly."

“How do I enter it?”

She took the opportunity to grasp his heavily muscled arm and point through the window. “See there—a causeway leads down from this tower to the cliff.” She glanced at him sharply. “Do you see it?”

“Ah—yes—I had not, but now I do. Yes, a causeway.”

Standing behind him, she smiled a little to herself. “I will remove the barrier,” she said.

He straightened his helm on his head. “For Klant and Eloarde and only those do I embark upon this adventure.”

She moved towards the wall and raised the window. He did not look at her as he strode down the causeway into the multicoloured mist.

As she watched him disappear, she smiled to herself. How easy it was to beguile the strongest man by pretending to go his way! He might add lands to his Empire, but he might find their populations unwilling to accept Eloarde as their Empress. In fact, if Aubec did his work well, then he would be creating more of a threat to Klant than ever Kaneloon had been.

Yet she admired him, she was attracted to him, perhaps, because he was not so accessible a little more than she had been to that earlier hero who had claimed Aubec's own land from Chaos barely two hundred years before. Oh, he had been a man! But he, like most before him, had needed no other persuasion than the promise of her body.

Earl Aubec's weakness had lain in his strength, she thought. By now he had vanished into the heaving mists.

She felt a trifle sad that this time the execution of the task given her by the Lords of Law had not brought her the usual pleasure.

Yes perhaps, she thought, she felt a more subtle pleasure in his steadfastness and the means she had used to convince him.

For centuries had the Lords of Law entrusted her with Kaneloon and its secrets. But the progress was slow, for there were few heroes who could survive Kaneloon's dangers—few who could defeat self-created perils.

Yet, she decided with a slight smile on her lips, the task had its various rewards. She moved into another chamber to prepare for the transition of the castle to the new edge of the world.

Thus were the seeds sewn of the Age of the Young Kingdoms, the Age of Men, which was to produce the downfall of Melniboné.

Book One

THE DREAMING CITY

Which tells how Elric came back to Imrryr, what he did there, and how, at last, his weird fell upon him ...

“What's the hour?” The black-bearded man wrenched off his gilded helmet and flung it from him, careless of where it fell. He drew off his leathern gauntlets and moved closer to the roaring fire, letting the heat soak into his frozen bones.

“Midnight is long past,” growled one of the other armoured men who gathered around the blaze. “Are you still sure he'll come?”

“It's said that he's a man of his word, if that comforts you.”

It was a tall, pale-faced youth who spoke. His thin lips formed the words and spat them out maliciously. He grinned a wolf-grin and stared the new arrival in the eyes, mocking him.

The newcomer turned away with a shrug. “That's so—for all your irony, Yaris. He'll come.” He spoke as a man does when he wishes to reassure himself.

There were six men, now, around the fire. The sixth was Smiorgan—Count Smiorgan Baldhead of the Purple Towns. He was a short, stocky man of fifty years with a scarred face partially covered with a thick, black growth of hair. His eyes smouldered morosely and his lumpy fingers plucked nervously at his rich-hilted longsword. His pate was hairless, giving him his name, and over his ornate, gilded armour hung a loose woollen cloak, dyed purple.

Smiorgan said thickly, “He has no love for his cousin. He has become bitter. Yyrkoon sits on the Ruby Throne in his place and has proclaimed him an outlaw and a traitor. Elric needs us if he would take his throne and his bride back. We can trust him.”

“You're full of trust tonight, Count,” Yaris smiled thinly, “a rare thing to find in these troubled times. I say this—” He paused and took a long breath, staring at his comrade summing them up. His gaze flicked from lean-faced Dharmit of Jharkor to Fadan of Lormyr who pursed his podgy lips and looked into the fire.

“Speak up, Yaris,” petulantly urged the patrician-featured Vilmirian, Naclon. “Let's hear what you have to say, lad, if it's worth hearing.”

Yaris looked towards Jiku the dandy, who yawned impolitely and scratched his long nose.

“Well!” Smiorgan was impatient. “What d'you say, Yaris?”

“I say that we should start now and waste no more time waiting on Elric's pleasure! He's laughing at us in some tavern a hundred miles from here—or else plotting with the Dragon Princes to trap us. For years we have planned this raid. We have little time in which to strike—our fleet is too big, too noticeable. Even if Elric has not betrayed us, then spies will soon be running eastwards to warn the Dragons that there is a fleet massed against them. We start to win a fantastic fortune—to vanquish the greatest merchant city in the world—to reach immeasurable riches—or horrible death at the hands of the Dragon Princes, if we wait overlong. Let's bide our time no more and set sail before our prize hears of our plan and brings up reinforcements!”

“You always were too ready to mistrust a man, Yaris.” King Naclon of Vilmir spoke slowly and carefully—distastefully eyeing the taut-featured youth. “We could not reach Imrryr without Elric's knowledge of the maze-channels which lead to its secret ports. If Elric will not join us—then our endeavour will be fruitless—hopeless. We need him. We must wait for him—”

else give up our plans and return to our homelands.”

“At least I'm willing to take a risk,” yelled Yaris, anger lancing from his slanting eyes. “You're getting old—all of you. Treasures are not won by care and forethought but by swift slaying and reckless attack.”

“Fool!” Dharmit's voice rumbled around the fire-flooded hall. He laughed wearily. “I spoke thus in my youth—and lost a fine fleet soon after. Cunning and Elric's knowledge will win us Imrryr—that and the mightiest fleet to sail the Sighing Sea since Melniboné's banner fluttered over all the nations of the Earth. Here we are—the most powerful Sea Lords in the world, masters, every one of us, of more than a hundred swift vessels. Our names are feared and famous—our fleets ravage the coasts of a score of lesser nations. We hold *power!*” He clenched his great fist and shook it in Yaris' face. His tone became more level and he smiled viciously, glaring at the youth and choosing his words with precision.

“But all this is worthless—meaningless—without the power which Elric has. That is the power of knowledge—of sorcery, if I must use the cursed word. His fathers knew of the magic which guards Imrryr from sea-attack. And his fathers passed that secret on to him. Imrryr, the Dreaming City, dreams in peace—and will continue to do so unless we have a guide to help us steer a course through the treacherous waterways which lead to her harbours. We need Elric—we know it, and he knows it. That's the truth!”

“Such confidence, gentlemen, is warming to the heart.” There was irony in the heavy voice which came from the entrance to the hall. The heads of the six Sea Lords jerked towards the doorway.

Yaris' confidence fled from him as he met the eyes of Elric of Melniboné. They were only eyes in a fine featured, youthful face. Crimson eyes which stared into eternity. Yaris shuddered, turned his back on Elric, preferring to look into the bright glare of the fire.

Elric smiled warmly as Count Smiorgan gripped his shoulder. There was a certain friendship between the two. He nodded condescendingly to the other four and walked with lithe grace towards the fire. Yaris stood aside and let him pass. Elric was tall, broad shouldered and slim-hipped. He wore his long hair bunched and pinned at the nape of his neck and, for an obscure reason, affected the dress of a Southern barbarian. He had long knee-length boots of soft doe-leather, a breastplate of strangely wrought silver, a jerkin of chequered blue and white linen, britches of scarlet wool and a cloak of rustling green velvet. At his hip rested his runesword of black iron—the feared Stormbringer, forged by ancient and alien sorcery.

His bizarre dress was tasteless and gaudy, and did not match his sensitive face and long-fingered, almost delicate hands, yet he flaunted it since it emphasised the fact that he did not belong in any company—that he was an outsider and an outcast. But, in reality, he had little need to wear such outlandish gear—for his eyes and skin were enough to mark him.

Elric, Last Lord of Melniboné, was a pure albino who drew his power from a secret and terrible source.

Smiorgan sighed. “Well, Elric, when do we raid Imrryr?”

Elric shrugged. “As soon as you like; I care not. Give me a little time in which to do certain things.”

“Tomorrow? Shall we sail tomorrow?” Yaris said hesitantly, conscious of the strange power dormant in the man he had earlier accused of treachery.

Elric smiled, dismissing the youth's statement. "Three days' time," he said. "Three—
more."

"Three days! But Imrryr will be warned of our presence by then!" Fat, cautious Fada spoke.

"I'll see that your fleet's not found," Elric promised. "I have to go to Imrryr first—and return."

"You won't do the journey in three days—the fastest ship could not make it." Smiorgan gaped.

"I'll be in the Dreaming City in less than a day," Elric said softly, with finality.

Smiorgan shrugged. "If you say so, I'll believe it—but why this necessity to visit the city ahead of the raid?"

"I have my own compunctions, Count Smiorgan. But worry not—I shan't betray you. I lead the raid myself, be sure of that." His dead-white face was lighted eerily by the fire and his red eyes smouldered. One lean hand firmly gripped the hilt of his runesword and he appeared to breathe more heavily. "Imrryr fell, in spirit, five hundred years ago—she will fall completely soon—for ever! I have a little debt to settle. This is my only reason for aiding you. As you know I have made only a few conditions—that you raze the city to the ground and a certain man and woman are not harmed. I refer to my cousin Yyrkoon and his sister Cymoril..."

Yaris' thin lips felt uncomfortably dry. Much of his blustering manner resulted from the early death of his father. The old sea-king had died—leaving young Yaris as the new ruler of his lands and his fleets. Yaris was not at all certain that he was capable of commanding such a vast kingdom—and tried to appear more confident than he actually felt. Now he said: "How shall we hide the fleet, Lord Elric?"

The Melnibonéan acknowledged the question. "I'll hide it for you," he promised. "I go now to do this—but make sure all your men are off the ships first—will you see to it, Smiorgan?"

"Aye," rumbled the stocky count.

He and Elric departed from the hall together, leaving five men behind; five men who sensed an air of icy doom hanging about the overheated hall.

"How could he hide such a mighty fleet when we, who know this fjord better than anyone could find nowhere?" Dharmit of Jharkor said bewilderedly.

None answered him.

They waited, tensed and nervous, while the fire flickered and died untended. Eventually Smiorgan returned, stamping noisily on the boarded floor. There was a haunted haze of fear surrounding him; an almost tangible aura, and he was shivering, terribly. Tremendous racking undulations swept up his body and his breath came short.

"Well? Did Elric hide the fleet—all at once? What did he do?" Dharmit spoke impatiently, choosing not to heed Smiorgan's ominous condition.

"He has hidden it." That was all Smiorgan said, and his voice was thin, like that of a sick man, weak from fever.

Yaris went to the entrance and tried to stare beyond the fjord slopes where many campfires burned, tried to make out the outlines of ships' masts and rigging, but he could see nothing.

"The night mist's too thick," he murmured, "I can't tell whether our ships are anchored..."

the fjord or not.” Then he gasped involuntarily as a white face loomed out of the clinging fog. “Greetings, Lord Elric,” he stuttered, noting the sweat on the Melnibonéan's strained features.

Elric staggered past him, into the hall. “Wine,” he mumbled, “I've done what's needed and it's cost me hard.”

Dharmit fetched a jug of strong Cadsandrian wine and with a shaking hand poured some into a carved wooden goblet. Wordlessly he passed the cup to Elric who quickly drained it. “Now I will sleep,” he said, stretching himself into a chair and wrapping his green cloak around him. He closed his disconcerting crimson eyes and fell into a slumber born of utter weariness.

Fadan scurried to the door, closed it and pulled the heavy iron bar down.

None of the six slept much that night and, in the morning, the door was unbarred and Elric was missing from the chair. When they went outside, the mist was so heavy that they soon lost sight of one another, though scarcely two feet separated any of them.

Elric stood with his legs astraddle on the shingle of the narrow beach. He looked back at the entrance to the fjord and saw, with satisfaction, that the mist was still thickening, though it lay only over the fjord itself, hiding the mighty fleet. Elsewhere, the weather was clear and overhead a pale winter sun shone sharply on the black rocks of the rugged cliffs which dominated the coastline. Ahead of him the sea rose and fell monotonously, like the chest of a sleeping water-giant, grey and pure, glinting in the cold sunlight. Elric fingered the raised runes on the hilt of his black broadsword and a steady north wind blew into the voluminous folds of his dark green cloak, swirling it around his tall, lean frame.

The albino felt fitter than he had done on the previous night when he had expended all his strength in conjuring the mist. He was well-versed in the art of nature-wizardry, but he did not have the reserves of power which the Sorcerer Emperors of Melniboné had possessed when they had ruled the world. His ancestors had passed their knowledge down to him—but not their mystic vitality and many of the spells and secrets that he had were unusable, since he did not have the reservoir of strength, either of soul or of body, to work them. But for that, Elric knew of only one other man who matched his knowledge—his cousin Yyrkoon. His hand gripped the hilt tighter as he thought of the cousin who had twice betrayed his trust and he forced himself to concentrate on his present task—the speaking of spells to aid him on his voyage to the Isle of the Dragon Masters whose only city, Imrryr the Beautiful, was the object of the Sea Lords' massing.

Drawn up on the beach, a tiny sailing-boat lay—Elric's own small ship, sturdy and far stronger, far older, than it appeared. The brooding sea flung surf around its timbers as the tide withdrew, and Elric realised that he had little time in which to work his helpful sorcery.

His body tensed and he blanked his conscious mind, summoning secrets from the dark depths of his soul. Swaying, his eyes staring unseeingly, his arms jerking out ahead of him and making unholy signs in the air, he began to speak in a sibilant monotone. Slowly the pitch of his voice rose, resembling the scarcely heard shriek of a distant gale as it came closer—then, quite suddenly, the voice rose higher until it was howling wildly to the skies and the air began to tremble and quiver. Shadow-shapes began slowly to form and they were never still but darted around Elric's body as, stiff-legged, he started forward towards his boat.

His voice was inhuman as it howled insistently, summoning the wind elementals—the

sylphs of the breeze; the *sharnahts*, makers of gales; the *h'Haarshanns*, builders of whirlwinds—hazy and formless, they eddied around him as he summoned their aid with the alien words of his forefathers who had, ages before, made unthinkable pacts with the elementals in order to procure their services.

Still stiff-limbed, Elric entered the boat and, like an automaton, his fingers ran up the sails and set it. Then a great wave erupted out of the placid sea, rising higher and higher until it towered over the vessel. With a surging crash, the water smashed down on the boat, lifted it, and bore it out to sea. Sitting blank-eyed in the stern, Elric still crooned his hideous song of sorcery as the spirits of the air plucked at the sail and sent the boat flying over the water faster than any mortal ship could speed. And all the while, the deafening, unholy shriek of the released elementals filled the air about the boat as the shore vanished and open sea was all that was visible.

So it was, with wind-demons for shipmates, that Elric, last Prince of the Royal line of Melniboné, returned to the last city still ruled by his own race—the last city and the finest remnant of Melnibonéan architecture. The cloudy pink and subtle yellow tints of her near towers came into sight within a few hours of Elric's leaving the fjord and just off-shore of the Isle of the Dragon Masters the elementals left the boat and fled back to their secret haunts among the peaks of the highest mountains in the world. Elric awoke, then, from his trance and regarded with fresh wonder the beauty of his own city's delicate towers which were visible even so far away, guarded still by the formidable sea-wall with its great gate, the five-doored maze and the twisting, high-walled channels, of which only one led to the inner harbour of Imrryr.

Elric knew that he dare not risk entering the harbour by the maze, though he knew the route perfectly. He decided, instead, to land the boat further up the coast in a small inlet of which he had knowledge. With sure, capable hands, he guided the little craft towards the hidden inlet which was obscured by a growth of shrubs loaded with ghastly blue berries of a type decidedly poisonous to men since their juice first turned one blind and then slowly mad. This berry, the *nodoil*, grew only on Imrryr as did other rare and deadly plants.

Light, low-hanging cloud wisps streamed slowly across the sun-painted sky, like fine cobwebs caught by a sudden breeze. All the world seemed blue and gold and green and white and Elric, pulling his boat up on the beach, breathed the clean, sharp air of winter and savoured the scent of decaying leaves and rotting undergrowth. Somewhere a bitch-ford barked her pleasure to her mate and Elric regretted the fact that his depleted race no longer appreciated natural beauty, preferring to stay close to their city and spend many of their days in drugged slumber. It was not the city which dreamed, but its overcivilised inhabitants. Elric, smelling the rich, clean winter-scents, was wholly glad that he had his birthright and did not rule the city as he had been born to do.

Instead, Yyrkoon, his cousin, sprawled on the Ruby Throne of Imrryr the Beautiful and hated Elric because he knew that the albino, for all his disgust with crowns and rulership, was still the rightful King of the Dragon Isle and that he, Yyrkoon, was an usurper, not elected by Elric to the throne, as Melnibonéan tradition demanded.

But Elric had better reasons for hating his cousin. For those reasons the ancient capital would fall in all its magnificent splendour and the last fragment of a glorious Empire would be obliterated as the pink, the yellow, the purple and white towers crumbled—if Elric had his way and the Sea Lords were successful.

On foot, Elric strode inland, towards Imrryr, and as he covered the miles of soft turf, the sun cast an ochre pall over the land and sank, giving way to a dark and moonless night brooding and full of evil portent.

At last he came to the city. It stood out in stark black silhouette, a city of fantastic magnificence, in conception and in execution. It was the oldest city in the world, built by artists and conceived as a work of art rather than a functional dwelling place, but Elric knew

that squalor lurked in many narrow streets and that the Lords of Imrryr left many of the towers empty and uninhabited rather than let the bastard population of the city dwell therein. There were few Dragon Masters left; few who would claim Melnibonéan blood.

Built to follow the shape of the ground, the city had an organic appearance, with winding lanes spiralling to the crest of the hill where stood the castle, tall and proud and many-spired—the final, crowning masterpiece of the ancient, forgotten artist who had built it. But there was no life-sound emanating from Imrryr the Beautiful, only a sense of soporific desolation. The city slept—and the Dragon Masters and their ladies and their special slaves dreamed drug-induced dreams of grandeur and incredible horror while the rest of the population, ordered by curfew, tossed on tawdry mattresses and tried not to dream at all.

Elric, his hand ever near his sword-hilt, slipped through an unguarded gate in the city wall and began to walk cautiously through the unlighted streets, moving upwards, through the winding lanes, towards Yyrkoon's great palace.

Wind sighed through the empty rooms of the Dragon towers and sometimes Elric would have to withdraw into places where the shadows were deeper when he heard the tramp of feet and a group of guards would pass, their duty being to see that the curfew was rigidly obeyed. Often he would hear wild laughter echoing from one of the towers, still ablaze with bright torchlight which flung strange, disturbing shadows on the walls; often, too, he would hear a chilling scream and a frenzied, idiot's yell as some wretch of a slave died in obscene agony to please his master.

Elric was not appalled by the sounds and the dim sights. He appreciated them. He was still a Melnibonéan—their rightful leader if he chose to regain his powers of kingship—and though he had an obscure urge to wander and sample the less sophisticated pleasures of the outside world, ten thousand years of a cruel, brilliant and malicious culture was behind him and the pulse of his ancestry beat strongly in his deficient veins.

Elric knocked impatiently upon the heavy, black-wood door. He had reached the palace and now stood by a small back entrance, glancing cautiously around him, for he knew that Yyrkoon had given the guards orders to slay him if he entered Imrryr.

A bolt squealed on the other side of the door and it moved silently inwards. A thin, seamed face confronted Elric.

“Is it the king?” whispered the man, peering out into the night. He was a tall, extremely thin individual with long, gnarled limbs which shifted awkwardly as he moved nearer, straining his beady eyes to get a glimpse of Elric.

“It's Prince Elric,” the albino said. “But you forget, Tanglebones, my friend, that a new king sits on the Ruby Throne.”

Tanglebones shook his head and his sparse hair fell over his face. With a jerking movement he brushed it back and stood aside for Elric to enter. “The Dragon Isle has but one king—and his name is Elric, whatever usurper would have it otherwise.”

Elric ignored this statement, but he smiled thinly and waited for the man to push the bolt back into place.

“She still sleeps, sire,” Tanglebones murmured as he climbed unlit stairs, Elric behind him.

“I guessed that,” Elric said. “I do not underestimate my good cousin's powers of sorcery.”

Upwards, now, in silence, the two men climbed until at last they reached a corridor which

was aflame with dancing torchlight. The marble walls reflected the flames and showed Elric crouching with Tanglebones behind a pillar, that the room in which he was interested was guarded by a massive archer—a eunuch by the look of him—who was alert and wakeful. The man was hairless and fat, his blue-black gleaming armour tight on his flesh, but his fingers were curled around the string of his short, bone bow and there was a slim arrow resting on the string. Elric guessed that this man was one of the crack eunuch archers, a member of the Silent Guard, Imrryr's finest company of warriors.

Tanglebones, who had taught the young Elric the arts of fencing and archery, had known of the guard's presence and had prepared for it. Earlier he had placed a bow behind the pillar. Silently he picked it up and, bending it against his knee, strung it. He fitted an arrow to the string, aimed it at the right eye of the guard and let fly—just as the eunuch turned to face him. The shaft missed. It clattered against the man's gorget and fell harmlessly to the reestrewn stones of the floor.

So Elric acted swiftly, leaping forward, his rune-sword drawn and its alien power surging through him. It howled in a searing arc of black steel and cut through the bone bow which the eunuch had hoped would deflect it. The guard was panting and his thick lips were wet as he drew breath to yell. As he opened his mouth, Elric saw what he had expected, the man was tongueless and was a mute. His own shortsword came out and he just managed to parry Elric's next thrust. Sparks flew from the iron and Stormbringer bit into the eunuch's fine-edged blade, he staggered and fell back before the nigromantic sword which appeared to be endowed with a life of its own. The clatter of metal echoed loudly up and down the short corridor and Elric cursed the fate which had made the man turn at the crucial moment. Grimly, swiftly, he broke down the eunuch's clumsy guard.

The eunuch saw only a dim glimpse of his opponent behind the black, whirling blade which appeared to be so light and which was twice the length of his own stabbing sword. He wondered, frenziedly, who his attacker could be and he thought he recognised the face. Then a scarlet eruption obscured his vision, he felt searing agony clutch at his face and then, philosophically, for eunuchs are necessarily given to a certain fatalism, he realised that he was to die.

Elric stood over the eunuch's bloated body and tugged his sword from the corpse's skull, wiping the mixture of blood and brains on his late opponent's cloak. Tanglebones had wisely vanished. Elric could hear the clatter of sandalled feet rushing up the stairs. He pushed the door open and entered the room which was lit by two small candles placed at either end of a wide, richly tapestried bed. He went to the bed and looked down at the raven-haired girl who lay there.

Elric's mouth twitched and bright tears leapt into his strange red eyes. He was trembling as he turned back to the door, sheathed his sword and pulled the bolts into place. He returned to the bedside and knelt down beside the sleeping girl. Her features were as delicate and of similar mould as Elric's own, but she had an added, exquisite beauty. She was breathing shallowly, in a sleep induced not by natural weariness but by her own brother's evil sorcery.

Elric reached out and tenderly took one fine-fingered hand in his. He put it to his lips and kissed it.

“Cymoril,” he murmured, and an agony of longing throbbed in that name. “Cymoril—wake up.”

The girl did not stir, her breathing remained shallow and her eyes remained shut. Elric's white features twisted and his red eyes blazed as he shook in terrible and passionate rage. He gripped the hand, so limp and nerveless, like the hand of a corpse; gripped it until he had to stop himself for fear that he would crush the delicate fingers.

A shouting soldier began to beat at the door.

Elric replaced the hand on the girl's firm breast and stood up. He glanced uncomprehendingly at the door.

A sharper, colder voice interrupted the soldier's yelling.

“What is happening—has someone tried to see my poor sleeping sister?”

“Yyrkoon, the black hellspawn,” said Elric to himself.

Confused babblings from the soldier and Yyrkoon's voice raised as he shouted through the door. “Whoever is in there—you will be destroyed a thousand times when you are caught. You cannot escape. If my good sister is harmed in any way—then you will never die, I promise you that. But you will pray to your Gods that you could!”

“Yyrkoon, you paltry rabble—you cannot threaten one who is your equal in the dark arts. It is I, Elric—your rightful master. Return to your rabbit hole before I call down every evil power upon, above, and under the Earth to blast you!”

Yyrkoon laughed hesitantly. “So you have returned again to try to waken my sister. Any such attempt will not only slay her—it will send her soul into the deepest hell—where you may join it, willingly!”

“By Arnara's six breasts—you it will be who samples the thousand deaths before long.”

“Enough of this.” Yyrkoon raised his voice. “Soldiers—I command you to break this door down—and take that traitor alive. Elric—there are two things you will never again have—my sister's love and the Ruby Throne. Make what you can of the little time available to you, for soon you will be grovelling to me and praying for release from your soul's agony!”

Elric ignored Yyrkoon's threats and looked at the narrow window to the room. It was just large enough for a man's body to pass through. He bent down and kissed Cymoril upon the lips, then he went to the door and silently withdrew the bolts.

There came a crash as a soldier flung his weight against the door. It swung open, pitching the man forward to stumble and fall on his face. Elric drew his sword, lifted it high and chopped at the warrior's neck. The head sprang from its shoulders and Elric yelled loudly in a deep, rolling voice.

“*Arioch! Arioch!* I give you blood and souls—only aid me now! This man I give you, mighty King of Hell—aid your servant, Elric of Melniboné!”

Three soldiers entered the room in a bunch. Elric struck at one and sheared off half his face. The man screamed horribly.

“Arioch, Lord of the Darks—I give you blood and souls. Aid me, evil one!”

In the far corner of the gloomy room, a blacker mist began slowly to form. But the soldiers pressed closer and Elric was hard put to hold them back.

He was screaming the name of Arioch, Lord of the Higher Hell, incessantly, almost unconsciously as he was pressed back further by the weight of the warriors' numbers. Behind them, Yyrkoon mouthed in rage and frustration, urging his men, still, to take Elric alive. The necessity gave Elric some small advantage—that and the runesword Stormbringer which was glowing with a strange black luminousness and the shrill howling it gave out was grating in

the ears of those who heard it. Two more corpses now littered the carpeted floor of the chamber, their blood soaking into the fine fabric.

“Blood and souls for my lord Arioeh!”

The dark mist heaved and began to take shape, Elric spared a look towards the corner and shuddered despite his inurement to hell-born horror. The warriors now had their backs to the thing in the corner and Elric was by the window. The amorphous mass that was a less than pleasant manifestation of Elric's fickle patron God, heaved again and Elric made out its intolerably alien shape. Bile flooded into his mouth and as he drove the soldiers towards the thing which was sinuously flooding forward he fought against madness.

Suddenly, the soldiers seemed to sense that there was something behind them. They turned, four of them, and each screamed insanely as the black horror made one final rush to engulf them. Arioeh crouched over them, sucking out their souls. Then, slowly, their bones began to give and snap and still shrieking bestially the men flopped like obnoxious invertebrates upon the floor; their spines broken, they still lived. Elric turned away, thankful for once that Cymoril slept, and leapt to the window ledge. He looked down and realised with despair that he was not going to escape by that route after all. Several hundred feet lay between him and the ground. He rushed to the door where Yyrkoon, his eyes wide with fear, was trying to drive Arioeh back. Arioeh was already fading.

Elric pushed past his cousin, spared a final glance for Cymoril, then ran the way he had come, his feet slipping on blood. Tanglebones met him at the head of the dark stairway.

“What has happened, King Elric—what's in there?”

Elric seized Tanglebones by his lean shoulder and made him descend the stairs. “No time,” he panted, “but we must hurry while Yyrkoon is still engaged with his current problem. In five days' time Imrryr will experience a new phase in her history—perhaps the last. I want you to make sure that Cymoril is safe. Is that clear?”

“Aye, Lord, but . . .”

They reached the door and Tanglebones shot the bolts and opened it.

“There is no time for me to say anything else. I must escape while I can. I will return in five days—with companions. You will realise what I mean when that time comes. Take Cymoril to the Tower of D'a'rputna—and await me there.”

Then Elric was gone, soft-footed, running into the night with the shrieks of the dying still ringing through the blackness after him.

Elric stood unspeaking in the prow of Count Smiorgan's flagship. Since his return to the fjord and the fleet's subsequent sailing for open sea, he had spoken only orders, and those in the tersest of terms. The Sea Lords muttered that a great hate lay in him, that it festered his soul and made him a dangerous man to have as comrade or enemy; and even Count Smiorgan avoided the moody albino.

The reaver prows struck eastward and the sea was black with light ships dancing on the bright water in all directions; they looked like the shadow of some enormous sea-bird flurrying on the water. Nearly half a thousand fighting ships stained the ocean—all of them of similar form, long and slim and built for speed rather than battle, since they were for coast-raiding and trading. Sails were caught by the pale sun; bright colours of fresh canvas—orange, blue, black, purple, red, yellow, light green or white. And every ship had sixteen or more rowers—each rower a fighting man. The crews of the ships were also the warriors who would attack Imrryr—there was no wastage of good man-power since the sea-nations were underpopulated, losing hundreds of men each year in their regular raids.

In the centre of the great fleet, certain larger vessels sailed. These carried great catapults on their decks and were to be used for storming the sea wall of Imrryr. Count Smiorgan and the other Lords looked at their ships with pride, but Elric only stared ahead of him, never sleeping, rarely moving, his white face lashed by salt spray and wind, his white hand tight upon his swordhilt.

The reaver ships ploughed steadily eastwards—forging towards the Dragon Isle and its fantastic wealth—or hellish horror. Relentlessly, doom-driven, they beat onwards, their oars splashing in unison, their sails bellying taut with a good wind.

Onwards they sailed, towards Imrryr the Beautiful, to rape and plunder the world's oldest city.

Two days after the fleet had set sail, the coastline of the Dragon Isle was sighted and the rattle of arms replaced the sound of oars as the mighty fleet hove to and prepared to accomplish what sane men thought impossible.

Orders were bellowed from ship to ship and the fleet began to mass into battle formation; then the oars creaked in their grooves and ponderously, with sails now furled, the fleet moved forward again.

It was a clear day, cold and fresh, and there was a tense excitement about all the men from Sea Lord to galley hand, as they considered the immediate future and what it might bring. Serpent prows bent towards the great stone wall which blocked off the first entrance to the harbour. It was nearly a hundred feet high and towers were built upon it—more functional than the lace-like spires of the city which shimmered in the distance, behind them. The ships of Imrryr were the only vessels allowed to pass through the great gate in the centre of the wall and the route through the maze—the exact entrance even—was a well-kept secret from outsiders.

On the sea wall, which now loomed tall above the fleet, amazed guards scrambled

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