

THE GOTHIC TOUCH
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Night was gathering too rapidly. Lightning was flickering across a leaden sky. Sounds of distant thunder were no longer so distant. Dark-winged birds were streaking across the sky for cover. Elric sniffed the air, pushed the white hair from his face. His horse was restless beneath his thighs.

Moonglum watched the horizon unhappily. They had been riding all day. Thus far they had eluded human pursuit, but the storm was quickly overtaking them. "We'll have to find some sort of shelter soon."

"They won't seek shelter." Elric searched his memory. He was uncertain of landmarks in this part of the land they fled across, but he remembered talk of a ruined castle, supposedly haunted. That sort of legend might hold off interlopers, and if it came down to it, better to make a stand behind walls than to be hunted down like a fox.

Thunder drew closer. Neither Elric nor Moonglum heard the blast as lightning tore apart the earth close behind them. It was enough to hold saddle as their panic-stricken horses plunged headlong through the sudden torrent.

"There!" shouted Elric. The lightning-blasted sky revealed stone walls ahead. He and Moonglum fought to control their horses, somehow galloping into the walled enclosure through its breached gate.

"There's a light!" Moonglum pointed as they crossed the courtyard. Elric smelled smoke through the drenched wind. Most of the interior structure was still standing, albeit gutted. What appeared to have been the castle itself had retained some of its roof. A fire could be seen through its open doorway.

Lightning crashed again. Elric and Moonglum rode their horses through the castle doorway, caring not who might challenge them. The interior was reasonably dry, if musty from long disuse. There was a good fire burning on the massive hearth. There was a broken table set with food and wine. There was no one present.

"Isn't this castle supposed to be haunted?" Moonglum was searching the shadows of the cavernous room. Little remained except ruin, rotted tapestries, crumbling furnishings. Whoever had overthrown the castle had not stayed to loot it.

"All ruined castles are haunted," said Elric, dismounting. "At least to the popular mind. Now tether our horses. Someone abides here, and we'll share this fire."

As Moonglum saw to their mounts, Elric shook off his cloak and warmed himself at the fire. The thin albino had little tolerance for the drenching, cold night. He considered the food and drink upon the table. Three settings. Cheese, bread, cold fowl, some apples, wine and—Elric delicately sniffed the bottle—brandy. He poured some of the brandy into a chalice of ruby glass. He could not identify its place of origin, but it was of excellent quality, and it warmed him.

Moonglum returned from the horses and almost struck away the chalice. "There might be poison!"

"Who knew that I would be here?" Elric was exhausted after almost two days on the run. He broke off a bit of bread. "Try the fowl, Moonglum, and tell me if it's poisoned."

"Three places are set," Moonglum pointed out. "Yet no one is here. And where do you find fresh apples at this season? I tell you, this castle is haunted."

"That fire is freshly laid," said Elric. "Our hosts are other travellers seeking shelter for the night. As the storm struck, they dashed away to see to their horses and goods. I'm certain they will join us soon."

The storm winds were moaning so furiously through the broken apertures of the castle that at first Elric did not notice the faint moan of Stormbringer.

Elric glanced toward the empty doorway, laying his hand upon the hilt of the runesword.

Lightning set fire to the night. The doorway was no longer empty.

It was a man, almost too large for a man, clad in mail, leather breeks and high boots, and a flapping black cloak. His long red hair was torn by the wind despite the rain. His eyes seemed to glow with cold blue fire in the burst of lightning. In his left hand he carried a long sword; in his right hand he held a human head.

Lightning faded.

Elric drew Stormbringer.

The man was already beside the fire.

"We both like dramatic entrances," said the man. He held the severed head to the light. "Know him?"

Elric looked carefully. "That's Duke Breidnor. He and his men are hunting me."

"Well, now he's not." The man wiped his sword free of remaining blood and sheathed it behind his shoulder. "And you can put away Stormbringer. What's left of Breidnor's henchmen are fleeing homeward. I left a few of their bodies outside the walls. Doubt the rest will try it again. In fact, I know they won't. I hope you haven't finished that brandy. We have a long night."

He poured a chalice of brandy for himself as Elric regarded him uncertainly. His hair and beard were red, his features somewhat brutal, and there was something very disturbing about his blue eyes. Elric judged his height at about six feet, and his weight had to be enormous for that mass of muscle—yet he moved like a cat. Elric sheathed Stormbringer.

"Good decision," said the stranger, sipping the brandy. "And now, Moonglum, please put away your sword and do something with that head. Just don't lob it into the fire. I've already set out a cold dinner."

He dropped down onto one of the remaining chairs. It creaked, but held his weight. "About as solid as the Ruby Throne, don't you think, Elric?"

Elric found another chair and some brandy. He was tired, and things were happening too fast. "Who are you, and where are you from?"

"I'm Kane, and I'm not from around here."

"Where are your men?"

"I'm alone."

"How did you manage to kill Duke Breidnor and his soldiers if you were alone?"

"I kill things. That's what I was created to do. I'm rather good at it."

"Are you from Ariocho?"

"Only a nodding acquaintance."

Elric lowered his chalice in annoyance. The man was either mad or playing with words; his accent was not one Elric could place. Nonetheless, this Kane had brought him the head of his enemy.

Elric turned his pink eyes full into Kane's cold blue gaze. He felt a sudden chill throughout his body. "Are you a demon?" Elric had not meant to speak the thought aloud.

"Something far worse," said Kane.

"How do you know me?"

Kane tore off a wing and began to eat it with some show of appetite. "By Stormbringer. Not to say that you do have certain distinctive features. Moonglum, stop pacing about and join us."

Elric closed his eyes and concentrated. There was an aura about this man which he could not penetrate. And yet...

"You are neither of Law nor Chaos."

"Correct. Slice of breast?"

"You are not of this world."

"I've already told you that. More brandy?"

"You raised a storm and drew us here. Then you killed my enemy."

"And just in time. Don't forget the dinner."

Elric angrily leapt to his feet, drawing Stormbringer. "Friend or not, I won't be trifled with—and I'm tired of your riddles!"

Moonglum slid away, circling.

Kane remained seated. His left hand was hidden as he sipped some wine.

"Pray be seated, both of you. We have a long night. All shall be made clear."

Elric nodded to Moonglum, then sheathed the runesword. They sat down, and Kane quietly replaced the throwing stars he had held.

Moonglum gnawed on an apple. "Where is your horse?"

"Somewhere else."

"And these apples? Whence?"

"Same place."

Elric was growing angry again, but poured more brandy to keep his temper under control. The stranger was mad, but meant him no harm. Tomorrow he and Moonglum would continue their journey without pursuit, thanks to Kane, if he were to be believed. Obviously the man was dangerous, but not an enemy. Elric wasn't certain as to what else he might be. He ate another piece of bread and decided to put up with the situation. Outside it was raining heavily, and Moonglum had just thrown more bits of wood onto the fire.

"I noticed your sword as you were cleaning it," Elric said. Conversation would soothe his anger. "I haven't seen its style before, nor the odd sheen of its steel. Is it from the Young Kingdoms?"

"It's from Carsultyal. Very old." For an instant there was a touch of pain in Kane's voice that only Elric could have discerned.

"And has it magical powers?"

"Only that it cuts well. I never worked out the actual alloy. Ran out of star ships to melt down."

Elric assumed that Kane meant falling stars. He had seen blades forged from such iron. "Where is Carsultyal?"

"Long ago and far away." Kane was punishing the brandy. "Elric, let's stop fencing. We are both sorcerers. We know that other worlds and other universes exist, sometimes side by side."

Elric paused, wondering. "Granted."

"And that there can be gateways between these other worlds."

"Yes, that's true." Elric had begun to get ahead of Kane's line of reasoning. No, Kane wasn't mad. Not in that way.

Kane considered his brandy. "Well, Elric. We three are sitting on the threshold of one of those gateways, and I crossed over with a hamper full of goodies to nibble on. And other fun stuff. Sorry about the storm, but there always are these atmospheric disturbances. Call it the gothic touch. So you got wet, but now you're warm and well-fed, and I took care of your immediate difficulty. Where's that head, Moonglum?"

Elric wasn't certain he'd caught every word of that, but he had understood enough. "How do you know of me?"

"You'll understand later. You and your various incarnations deal through time and universe more than I do. It was merely a matter of intersecting you, Stormbringer, and this gateway. My being here is a feat any sorcerer could carry out." Elric suspected the man was lying, but let it go for the moment.

Stormbringer seemed to moan to him. Elric felt his own forehead. Either his hands were cold or he was feverish from the thunderstorm. "Overlooking the how of it—then tell me why."

Kane was having some cheese. "Oh, that. Well, I did just save your life. Don't forget the dinner."

"You created this situation, didn't you?"

"Well, I wasn't the one who was being chased down by a mercenary duke and fifty soldiers. But to be truthful, I may have used the situation to my advantage. Some."

"What do you want of me, Kane? Elric considered riding away into the night. It was a stormy night. He thought about killing the man, but Kane did not seem inclined to do him harm—rather the opposite. Elric sighed and massaged his temples. He wasn't at all sure he could take Kane. Something in the man's eyes suggested he couldn't.

"Stormbringer," said Kane.

"What!"

"Just the use of it."

"You're mad."

"Oh, yes. I'll need you to wield the runesword. I didn't mean to imply that I wanted to take it from your possession. The thing is dangerous. Nor does it like me."

Elric decided that he and Moonglum would take watches beside the fire and leave at first light.

"Let me tell you a story," offered Kane.

"You are our host," said Elric wearily.

"What do you know about this castle?"

"Nothing. I just remembered that it was in this vicinity. Abandoned for a century. Supposedly haunted. All ruins have their ghosts."

"Some much worse than ghosts."

Kane examined the empty brandy bottle and said something unpleasant, or so it seemed to Elric's ears. It was in no language he had ever heard. He watched as Kane vanished into the darkness beyond the firelight, moving surely, then returned with a wicker basket. He had brought a hamper. . . from wherever.

As Kane brought forth a last bottle, Elric observed, "You can see in the dark."

"Can't we all, to some extent," said Kane. "Excellent Moonglum, please open this and pour for the three of us. We'll have need soon."

Once chalices were filled: "As I was saying." Kane sniffed the brandy and shrugged. "There are physical gateways to other worlds. This castle is one of them. Elric, you should know more about this than I do. I only know what I have learned from my side of the portal. Our time channels run very close. Too close. Virtually this same castle exists in both of our worlds."

Lightning continued to flicker past the empty windows. Rain seeped down from the failing roof. The wind kicked at the rotting tapestries. Kane cursed, rose, and threw a broken section of sideboard into the fire. He did this without apparent effort; Elric judged that the wooden construction must weigh over a hundred pounds.

The great fireplace caught up the ruined sideboard. The firelight flared, illuminating the three of them as they sat at the table. Kane studied the remains of the fowl, tore off the other wing. "Wants more salt," he apologized, eating carefully.

Elric was growing impatient. "I've told you that I know little about his castle. Get on with it."

Kane sucked the last flesh from the wing bones and tossed them into the fire as easily as he had thrown the broken sideboard. He licked his fingers and reached for the brandy.

"Some years ago—I'm not certain how many in your time frame—a Certain object fell to earth near here. The lord of the castle rode out with his men to determine what had happened. They discovered a tot-n and burnt expanse of field where a star had fallen. The star was encrusted with fabulous jewels beyond their imagination. The lord had his men bring up carts and oxen to carry away this treasure. They did so, securing it within secret vaults deep beneath the castle.

"Of course, word of this treasure spread. Clever thieves tried to find it. Other powerful lords tried to demand their share. In the end, a demon was summoned from the outer depths to guard the treasure. The demon guarded the treasure, but not the castle. When the walls were finally breached and the defenders massacred, the victors did not live to enjoy their spoils. No one left the final battle, and this castle has been cursed ever since."

Elric vaguely remembered such a tale, or one similar: this was an isolated province and of little notice to him. He toyed with his chalice, not drinking. "And where does all this lead us?"

"I can find the treasure room," said Kane. "All that I want would fit

into this hamper. The rest is yours. Enough to raise a mercenary army, sit upon the Ruby Throne, whatever you desire. Yours for the taking."

"And why are you my benefactor?"

Kane swirled his brandy. "The demon is still there. On guard. I can't kill it alone. I need you. And Stormbringer."

"You're a sorcerer. Exorcise it."

"Not this one."

Moonglum drew Elric aside. "Don't trust him."

"I won't," said Elric. "But he has some oblique scheme in mind and hasn't harmed us. I'll play his game and seek for the advantage."

To Kane, Elric said, "We'll follow you. Only first explain to me why this castle is a gateway to your world."

Kane paused. "Crystal. A magic crystal from the fallen star. 'l'hat's all I want to take with me."

Kane carried the hamper off into the darkness, returned with it and a pair of lanterns. "Light these, Moonglum, and we'll be off."

Moonglum made a taper from the fire and lit the lanterns. In passing, he started to lift the hamper. Kane quickly took it from him.

Moonglum whispered to Elric: "The hamper must be filled with lead. I nearly sprained my wrist."

"Kane is carrying it," said Elric. He held aloft his lantern. "Keep your wits about you."

"Let's just take to our horses," Moonglum whispered.

"I want to see what game Kane plays. Kane knows too much about me, and I know far too little about him."

Moonglum shook his head. "A man who sets out food and drink, then goes off to destroy a demon."

"Can't fight a demon on an empty stomach," Kane called back from the perimeter of darkness. "And you two were done in."

Either he had excellent hearing, or Kane could read their thoughts. Elric wondered if he should heed Moonglum's advice.

Kane led them down a stone stairway, slippery with mouldering debris. Water had penetrated here from the torrent outside and ran in rivulets down the steps. Elric thought of the warm fire above and wondered why he shouldn't leave Kane to prowl about these cellars on his own.

The stairway descended to a cellar of cavernous size, seemingly far out of proportion to the castle above. At the fringes of their lantern light, Elric could discern vast heaps of wreckage, festooned with cobwebs and grotesque traceries of fungi. Probably the castle had been provisioned to withstand a long siege, he judged.

Kane strode confidently past it all, further increasing Elric's suspicions, and led them to another stone stairway which descended into a dank subcellar. A rusted iron gate had been battered apart, and their lanterns revealed mouldering instruments of torture. Broken remnants of human skeletons huddled beneath the chains that had pinioned them, some with bony wrists still captive in their manacles. Upon the ruins of the rack a desiccated corpse had long ago broken apart. Suspended overhead, leathery arms still reached pleadingly from an iron cage. No rats, Elric observed; but then there was no longer anything here for them.

At the far end of the dungeon stood a massive door. Its hinges set well into the stone wall, it was forged of a black iron, strangely unruined, and not unlike the appearance of the runesword. It was constructed to withstand a siege engine, and it bore an equally massive lock.

"And do you have the key?" Elric asked. His tone was sarcastic, but he wasn't at all certain that Kane might not.

Kane set down the hamper. "I think I can work this."

Moonglum whispered to Elric: "That is not the hamper he was using to carry our dinner. It's solid metal."

"I know," said Elric. "But I can't quite guess the nature of his game. Be on your guard."

Kane pressed his hand against the massive lock. There was a loud snap as the bolt broke away, and then the entire mechanism rotted into dust. Kane pushed, and the huge door fell open. Foul darkness bellowed from within.

"Impressive," Elric remarked.

Kane stepped back quickly and drew his sword, watching the opened doorway.

"What now, Kane?" Elric had already drawn Stormbringer.

"There's something I neglected to mention." Kane retrieved the metal hamper. "Not everyone in the castle died in the final battle. Quite a number of them sought refuge here and were shut away for at least a century—I said I'm not certain of your time frame. Their descendants are likely to be unpleasant."

"What could they have eaten?" Moonglum asked.

"What do you think?" answered Kane.

"Mushrooms and fungi?"

"For starters. Let's have a look."

Elric examined the ruined lock as he passed by. He knew of magic that could open any lock, but not by the simple touch of a hand. If Kane's powers were that great, why was this stranger requiring his help in whatever mad expedition Kane was leading him into? Elric cursed himself for allowing Kane to sweep him along on this scheme, but his curiosity urged him to follow. It would be one short diversion from too many nights of painful unrest.

Beyond the doorway their lanterns shone weakly into an indeterminate length of vaulted stone passageways. They were deep within the earth, and water trickled from everywhere—masking the sound of their footsteps as would dripping leaves in a dense forest after a drenching rainfall. The stones of the arches were rimmed with nitre and dripping loops of fungus, creating an almost palpable glow. The air stank of the tomb and hurt Elric's chest, but a faint wind shuddered the flame of his lantern. Elric thought about the source of that wind, then pushed the thought from his mind.

The tunnel broke into numerous intersections, yet Kane seemed confident of his direction. Slight scuttling sounds scurried from black corridors. Elric glimpsed the glow of rats' eyes and the slither of a large salamander. Grotesque white toads shuffled away from their advance. Pale spiders as large as his hand clung to the stones, watching for prey. Elric began to feel a certain kinship: this was a netherworld of albinos.

Elric guessed that they had been walking beneath the earth for perhaps half a mile. "Kane, do you know who dug this maze—and why? There are easier means to protect a treasure."

"They must have followed the descent path," Kane said helpfully. "They reinforced the chasm with walls and arches, following blind rifts as well."

"Who did?" demanded Elric.

Kane's sword moved faster than Elric thought possible. At one instant the barely glimpsed creature was leaping at Kane from the darkness of a side tunnel. In that same instant Kane's blade had cut through its neck and shoulder, flinging it to the tunnel floor. The two pieces writhed for a moment. Elric had never seen a swordsman strike such a blow onehanded. He made a mental note and wondered how many of Duke Breidnor's henchmen were still alive.

Moonglum brought his lantern close. The creature was naked, male, and vaguely human. His flesh was as pallid as Elric's, but there was some dirty grey color to the brain that hung in filthy tatters from a scabrous scalp. The limbs were shortened and misshapen, covered with pustulated sores. The face was bestial, less apish than wolfish, with a protruding muzzle. A second head, no larger than a doll's, snapped at them from the center of his chest. Kane casually sliced it away with his sword tip.

"Pretty," Kane said. "Unless they pause to feed on this one, we'll soon be up against far worse."

"You said there were survivors imprisoned within here." Elric stepped past the dead thing. "By what sorcery was this created?"

"Residual radiation." In response to Elric's blank look, Kane amended, "The power of the guardian demon. That's why I need you and Stormbringer. We must kill it quickly."

Moonglum hadn't understood some of Kane's words. "This demon. How does it feed?"

Kane pointed back to the misshapen corpse. "Lot of these about. Sacrifices locked here in this maze."

"You said they were survivors of the last battle." Elric's tone was suspicious.

"Both," said Kane. "Look out!"

The creatures rushed them from the darkness, from everywhere. Creatures. Elric could not see them as anything human. Most of them were naked; those with a few tatters of filthy clothing were even more obscene. Some few carried rusted weapons. Most seemed not to know the use of weapons beyond rotted teeth and talon-length nails.

They were monstrous, misshapen mockeries of humanity, parodies created from the drug-induced nightmares of some deranged artist. Men, women, children—they flung themselves upon the three from out of the darkness. Elric had no coherent impression of their numbers. They were boiling out of the blackness like an eruption of vampire bats from a putrid cave.

"Guard your lantern!" Elric had already set his aside—he needed both hands to wield Stormbringer—and Moonglum did the same. Kane was somewhere in the darkness beyond. He could fend for himself after leading them into this.

Something with three arms clawed at Elric. The runesword swept it away as Elric turned to cut both heads from the thing that had crept up behind him. A woman with six breasts flung herself upon his sword even as she flung her child into his face. Elric felt the brush of teeth across his scalp, stepped away to disembowel a mewling thing whose ribs grew out of its skin. His lantern overturned and went out.

Elric leapt back toward Moonglum. "Guard your lantern! We're dead without it!"

"Where's Kane?"

"Dead, I hope."

Strength was surging through Elric as Stormbringer struck lethally again and again. Moonglum fought gamely at his back. They were normally overmatched against these odds, but these were demented beasts rather than skilled warriors. Nonetheless, Elric knew that numbers of mindless killers with no thought of self-preservation could not be held at bay for very much longer.

A giant with three eyes across his forehead lurched toward Elric, raising a massive club as the albino tried to wrest Stormbringer free of the ribs and dying four-handed grasp of something that still clutched and screamed. Elric tried to twist away. The giant fell to his knees. His lower legs fell elsewhere. Elric freed his runesword and split the giant's skull down through the third eye. The club flew off into the darkness. Kane stepped over the corpse.

"Nice piece of work," said Kane. "I knew we could work well together." He peered through the darkness. "I think that's about all they can manage for now. Still, we'll have to keep close watch. Moonglum, see if you can light the other lantern."

"I don't take commands from you."

"Moonglum, see if you can light the other lantern," said Elric. He felt tired and cross. Whatever strength Stormbringer had stolen from these creatures of the dark, it wasn't sufficient for his needs.

"Kane, you led us into this ambush."

"I warned you there might be difficulties. Let's be going before they regroup."

Moonglum relit Elric's lantern. Elric held it aloft. "How many are left to regroup?"

Revealed now, from the darkness in which Kane had fought, was a slaughterhouse of broken and dismembered and vaguely human bodies. Elric

remembered Kane's words: "I kill things. That's what I was created to do. I'm rather good at it." Before, Elric had assumed it was no more than a morbid jest. It was not a jest.

"I doubt they'll attack again," Kane called back. "Those who fled will leave us to their demon guardian. Besides, they'll have plenty to feast upon now."

Behind them, from the fringes of their lantern light, Elric could see misshapen bodies being dragged away into the maze of tunnels. Kane had recovered his metal hamper and was moving along confidently.

"Keep close to him," Elric murmured to Moonglum.

"Why don't we just go back?"

"Do you know the way?"

"It's worth trying."

True enough, Elric told himself, but the scant strength from Stormbringer made him reckless. He said, "Just stay close."

The tunnel abruptly fanned out into a vast cavern whose limits were well beyond the reach of their lanterns. A dull blue glow—seemingly from the cavern walls—provided murky light. Elric thought that this might well be the abode of Arioach, or at least an antechamber. The cavern must stretch on for hundreds of yards.

It wasn't a cavern.

Elric touched his hand to one wall. Not stone. Torn metal. Cold. He pounded the hilt of Stormbringer against its surface. It peeled like a sunken bell. What he had first assumed were stalactites and stalagmites were wrenched metal girders. Elric touched them, trying to imagine who had created this broken palace.

"Primarily that's a titanium and iridium alloy," Kane said, watching Elric closely. "I'm not certain what else. Likely osmium as well, but that's just a guess from the fact that the ship is relatively intact. As you will have observed, it hit rather hard."

Elric strained his eyes to look about. He might have been in the belly of a gigantic whale. Water dripped from the metallic ribs above, formed pools of slime upon the floor. Great masses of corroded mechanisms lay smashed and shrouded in layers of fungi. Gaping holes revealed black depths of decks below. It was a ship. But what sort of ship? And from whence?

"I don't see any great heaps of treasure." Moonglum was awed, but remained practical. "Nor do I see any guardian demons."

"All in good course," Kane assured him.

Elric's fascination with the ruin overpowered his initial anger and suspicion. He thrust Stormbringer into a mass of webby fungus beside one of the smashed machines. A skeleton fell apart as the shroud tore open. The skull that rolled away had a jaw bone not unlike that of a crocodile. One of the huge, pallid spiders scurried for a new shelter.

"Kane, what is this place? And no more lies."

Elric looked for an answer, but Kane was no longer there.

Moonglum gaped. "He was just.. ."

Kane reappeared some thirty feet away. Under the soft blue effulgence Elric was certain that Kane hadn't simply dashed away before their eyes.

For once Kane seemed somewhat shaken. "Time slip. We're balanced on an uncertain flux between our worlds. I'm not at all sure how long I can maintain this. We'll need to work fast."

Elric sat down on a mouldering pile of rubble, the runesword clenched in his fists. "First you will tell me where we are and why this metal cavern was built. Then you may speak about treasures from the stars."

Kane forced the anger from his voice as he started to speak. It was obvious that he needed Elric, and that matters were swiftly getting beyond his control. He glanced at the lead-lined hamper and sighed.

"Right. You have some understanding of the heavens. Perhaps then, you are aware that the stars are distant suns, some with other worlds revolving about them, some with advanced life forms."

"I have heard such hypotheses."

"Right. Assume that there are also parallel universes to your own world. Invisible and unknown to you, but only a rift in time and space away."

"For the sake of the argument." Elric was intrigued, but he kept his fists clenched upon Stormbringer.

Kane nudged the metal carrier with his boot. "Ships sail across the seas. This is a ship that sailed across the stars. It crashed here, tearing into the earth. Most on board were killed. The rest were worshipped. A cult was born, and a fortress was built to preserve the wreckage. 'l'hey fed on human sacrifices, mutating over the generations. Finally the people rose up, stormed and destroyed the castle. They feared the demons beneath and put their captives away in this maze. Then fled the region."

"Assuming I believed you," said Elric, remembering the story about the jewel-encrusted falling star, "just why have you lured me into this deadly puzzle?"

"You cut a deal with Ariocho, and you're questioning my motives?"

"I am."

"Yes. Well." Kane kept his eye on Moonglum, who was carefully circling to get behind him. If Kane had to kill him, his brittle alliance with Elric would be ended.

Kane continued, "First of all, you and Stormbringer are very good. Sit down somewhere, Moonglum. You've seen the mutations of the former humans who infest this place. Imagine what may have mutated from the survivors of this ship. I need help."

Elric wished he were asleep and dreaming. He knew he wasn't. "Why should I help you?"

"Because that last time slip landed you firmly in my world. You won't like it. I can send you back to Melniboné. We're tottering on the edge of a major trans-dimensional warp. I have to block it."

"Such unexpected altruism."

"I mentioned the jewels."

"A lie. I ought to kill you now."

Kane unexpectedly grasped the runesword by its blade. Elric jerked it away. Kane opened his hand. There was no wound. Elric felt a sudden pain in his chest. The runesword felt icy cold. His heart seemed to falter. Elric stepped away, gathering his strength for whatever might follow.

"Don't make casual threats," said Kane. He had not drawn his sword.

"Next time I won't be so casual," Elric promised.

"Save your anger for the demon." Kane examined his hand, then vanished.

He reappeared some twenty feet away, behind them. "It's breaking apart." Any anger he had shown toward Elric was forgotten. "Where's my case?"

"Just where you left it," said Moonglum, pointing.

Kane snatched it up. "Continuum is close to breaking up. We have to move fast." He stared at Elric, as if seeing him for the first time. "Corum?"

"What?" Elric was still looking for Kane's blood upon the runesword.

"No. Of course not." Kane took a deep breath and glanced all about. Elric was reminded of a sleeper awakening from some deep dream. Kane had vanished for only a few seconds.

"We have to kill it first," Kane said. He seemed to be fully recovered from whatever had happened to him. "We'll take it from two sides, Elric. Moonglum can wait for a chance to strike."

"Strike at what?" Elric asked patiently. He had decided that Kane was completely mad. A mad, dangerous, out-of-control sorcerer.

"Whatever is lurking in the control room."

"The demon?"

"Well, it's probably lurking amidst the power units. We might be lucky I just need the control room."

"No heaps of treasure?" asked Moonglum, expecting the answer to be no.

"There might be heaps upon heaps," said Kane. He didn't sound wholly sincere.

"Elric, let's leave this place," begged Moonglum.

Elric was stirred beyond his deep mood of brooding depression for the first time that he cared to recall. "I want to see this to the end."

Kane led them forward through the gigantic wreckage. Elric wondered again how Kane seemed to know his way through it all. Despite the bleak despair that had claimed his soul, he began to experience the rush of discovering things he had only known in partially remembered dreams.

"This is it," said Kane. "Be on your guard."

"What is it?" Elric demanded.

Kane was dismantling a control panel, using his sword and long fingers to rip away metal surfaces. "Should be about here. . ."

Kane vanished. Elric and Moonglum stood staring at one another. A large tentacle thrust out of a rift in the deck and sought for them. Elric hewed it away with the black sword. The tentacle severed. There was an inhuman scream. Stormbringer shuddered in Elric's grasp. Another tentacle thrust forward from the darkness below.

Kane slashed it apart. Elric had not seen him reappear. The tentacle twisted away, to be replaced by another.

"Time surge is mounting," Kane said. "I'm losing time phase. Keep that thing at bay. I only need a few minutes."

Elric was too occupied to tell Kane what he thought of him. Moonglum darted in and about, as Stormbringer cut cleanly through another grasping tentacle. Elric felt no increase in strength, but then he was only wounding the creature below. Or were there many such creatures?

Elric felt a sudden blow to his chest, and then he and Moonglum were sprawled across opposite sides of the chamber. Neither had a wound. Kane suddenly appeared next to Moonglum. He was dazed, but instantly on his feet.

"Elric! Now!" Kane shouted.

From the pit beneath the control deck a massive shape was rising. Its face was a mass of writhing tentacles surrounding an elephantine head. Crab-like jaws were clicking at them; eyes glowered from stubby stalks. Membraneous wings hung from its shoulders, as webbed talons reached out. The last, mutated survivor of the star ship had entered the bridge.

Kane threw all of this strength into a blow at the creature's neck, or where its neck should be. A tentacle sent him crashing against the control room wall.

Elric saw his chance in that instant and brought Stormbringer slashing down upon the tentacled skull. Its head was as large as Kane himself, but the black blade split it apart, sending the monster sliding back into the pit from whence it had arisen.

Elric felt sickened.

Kane regained his feet. He was stunned and in pain, but he had taken far worse. His genetically altered body had once again held together, as it had been intended to do. "I think you killed it. Good work. I knew I could count on you when there were demons to be slain."

"This treasure you spoke of," reminded Moonglum.

"Kane was lying," said Elric, still weakened.

"Well, not as such." Kane removed the remaining section of control panel where he had worked earlier and lifted out a box-like instrument. It was as large as a man's chest and seemed to be a heavy burden even for Kane. "It's a transducer. Crucial for what I have in mind."

Elric stood up angrily. "You engineered this entire interlude just so you could acquire an armload of rubbish."

"I did need your help. And it's not rubbish. Sorry about all the jewels. I owe you."

Kane opened the leaden case he had dragged along throughout their journey. Elric heard some faint clicking sounds. Kane closed the hamper.

He cradled the transducer. "Well, I hope this still works, after all this. Oh, in about an hour ten pounds of bomb-grade plutonium will explode here, closing the gate to certain forces who wish me no good. I stole this

lead picnic basket from them. This portal opens to other worlds as well, and I'm not the only one seeking a transducer. There will be a very large explosion, but it will close the gate—this gate—between our worlds. There are others.

"Come on, I'll lead you back to your world. Then you have to make a run for it. Elric, we will meet again."

Soon Elric and Moonglum were astride their horses, galloping madly into the night, with only confused memories of their adventure. Daylight seemed close at hand.

Miles behind them, the ruined castle blossomed into a mushroom of fire, ejecting itself from the earth like a rising star, bursting into the nigh sky. The blast caused their horses to stumble, but they kept racing through the rain and darkness.

"Where did Kane go?" Moonglum wondered.

"I hope we never find out," said Elric.