

Cold Light

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The assault on the ogres' stronghold had been brutal, reflected Gaethaa as he wearily looked over the ruins. Pulling off his silver-trimmed helmet, he ran a bleeding hand over his grimy face, pushing the sweat-soaked blond locks from his eyes. He squinted through the smoke that made red the sun. Inside the fortress walls all was one chaotic turmoil of smashed and burning buildings, seige engines—bodies of both his men and the ogres' retainers.

He pushed a corpse from an overturned cart and sprawled onto the vacated space. Wincing against the pain as he sucked in a deep breath—some bruised ribs there at best, but the cuirass had turned the sword—Gaethaa permitted himself the tired exultation befitting a man who has brilliantly conceived and executed a difficult task, one fully as honorable as it was dangerous.

Credit must be given to many others, to be certain. Had it not

been for the genius of the young Tranodeli wizard, Cereb Ak-Cetee, the sorcerous flames that guarded the ogres' walls would not have been extinguished, nor their impenetrable obsidian gate blasted into splintered rubble. Mollyl had been magnificent as he led the first wave through the smouldering gap and into the full fury of the ogres' minions. And the Red Three had very nearly succeeded in overwhelming his soldiers, even with the failure of their spells and the rout of their servants. Many had been smashed and torn under the huge weapons of the seemingly invincible ogre brothers. Then Gesell, the middle brother, fell from the poisoned arrow which Anmuspi the Archer threaded through the visor of his helmet. And Omsell, the oldest, was grievously wounded from a swordthrust of the dying Malander, and as the ogre fell to his knees, Gaethaa himself had struck his hideous head from his shoulders. That left only Dasell, who had been knocked senseless when he tried to leap in escape from the fortress walls. Gaethaa had ordered him bound, and now the ogre's twelve-foot body swung in grotesque dance, as it dangled from a gibbet overlooking the valley that he and his brothers had so long held in terror.

Alidore approached him through the haze, his broken arm now roughly bandaged. You did that when you blocked Omsell's axe from splitting me, thought Gaethaa, and vowed to make his lieutenant a generous gift from his personal portion of the booty, although such bravery was truly a knight's duty to his lord.

"We've got it all about mopped up, milord." Alidore had started to salute with his other hand, but decided it would look foolish. "Looks like we've rounded together everyone still alive inside. Not too pretty—the Red Three must have ordered all captives slaughtered when it was obvious that we were about to break through the wall. So that leaves us with maybe twenty survivors that we're holding for your orders—the last of their soldiers and servants."

"Kill them."

Alidore paused, reluctant to dispute his leader. "Milord, most of them swear they were forced to serve the ogres. They either obeyed their commands or were eaten like the others."

A cold note crept into Gaethaa's voice and his face was hard. "Most are probably lying. The others deserve worse, for they stooped to save their own lives by becoming tools for the enslavement and destruction of their fellow men. No, Alidore, mercy is commendable to be sure, but when you seek to destroy an absolute evil, you must destroy it absolutely. Show mercy in expunging a blight, and you only leave seeds to spread it anew. Kill them all."

Alidore turned to give the order, but Mollyl had been listening and was already loping across the court to see it carried out. He would enjoy that, Alidore thought in distaste, then dismissed the Pellinite from his thoughts. He addressed Gaethaa sincerely.

"Milord, you have done a really magnificent thing here today! For years this land has lived in abject terror of the Red Three. Most of the countryside has been stripped bare by them, and no one can say how many captives have ended their lives as food on the ogres' table! With their death the area can return to life once more—its people can farm the lands and sell their wares in peace, and travellers can enter the valleys and pass without danger. And here—as before when I have followed you on your missions—you will accept nothing from the people but their gratitude!"

Gaethaa smiled tiredly and waved him to silence. "Please, Alidore! Save eulogies for my death. I can't bear them now. Many have died to help me in my crusade, otherwise I could have done nothing. They are the ones who deserve your praise.

"No," and his voice was dreamy, "my only desire is to destroy

these agents of evil. It is my goal in life, and I ask nothing in return."

Admiration glowed on Alidore's battle-weary face. "And now that the Red Three are destroyed, what is to be our next mission?"

Gaethaa's voice was inspired. "As my next mission I will seek out and destroy one of the most dangerous agents of evil that history or legend knows. Tomorrow I will ride out for the death of a man called Kane!"

I. Where Death Has Lain

At times the awesome curse of immortality weighed on Kane beyond all endurance. Then he was overcome with long periods of black despair, during which he withdrew entirely from the world and spent his days in gloomy brooding. In such dark depression he would remain indefinitely, his mind wandering through the centuries it had watched, while within there cried unanswered a longing for peace. Ultimately some new diversion, some chance of fate, some abrupt reversal of spirit, would cut through his hopeless despair and send him forth once again into the world of men. Then cold despair would melt before the black heat of his defiance against the ancient god who had cursed him.

It happened that such a mood had seized Kane when he came to Sebbei. He had just fled the deserts of Lomarn, where his bandits had for a few months been plundering rich caravans and laying waste to the scattered oasis towns. An ingenious trap had

cut down most of Kane's forces, and he had fled westward into the ghost land of Demornte. Here his enemies would not follow, for the plague which had annihilated this nation was still held in utmost dread, and although it had struck this desert locked land nearly two decades before, still no one entered and no one left silent Demornte.

Dead Demornte. Demornte whose towns lie empty, whose farms are slowly returning to forest. Demornte where death has lain and life will no more linger. Land of death where only shadows move in empty cities, where the living are but a handful to the countless dead. Demornte where ghosts stalk silent streets in step with the living, where the living walk side by side with their ghosts. And a man must look closely to tell one from the other.

When the great deserts of Lartroxia West and Lomarn to the east had been carved from the earth, some freak of nature had spared Demornte. Here, shouldered between two mighty deserts, green land had held out against scorched sand, and a considerable region of gently rolling hills and cool lakes had sheltered thousands of inhabitants under its low forests. It had been as a giant oasis, Demornte, and its people had lived pleasantly, working their many small farms and trading with the great caravans that crossed the deserts from east and west.

The plague had ridden with one such caravan, a plague such as these lands had never seen. Perhaps in the faraway land from which it had come, the people had formed a resistance to the disease. But here in fertile Demornte it sped like the wind throughout the green land, and thousands burned in its fevered delirium, screaming for water they could not swallow.

Desert locked Demornte. The plague could not cross the sands, so its fury fell fully on this peaceful world. And when it had run its course at last, peace returned to Demornte. The land became one vast tomb and knew the quiet of the tomb, for rarely were

there enough survivors to bury the dead. Demornte, where ghosts stalk silent streets in step with the living, where the living walk side by side with their ghosts. And a man must look closely to tell one from the other.

Some few the plague had spared. Most of these gathered in Sebbei, the old capital, and here a few hundred dragged out their days where before 10,000 had bustled about their daily tasks. In Sebbei the remnants of a nation gathered together to await death.

To Sebbei Kane came seeking peace. A deathless man in a land of the dead, he was drawn by the quiet peace of the city. Along overgrown roads his horse had carried him, past farms where the forest was ineluctably obliterating all signs of man's labors. He had ridden through debris strewn streets of deserted towns, watched only by empty windows and yawning doorways. Often he passed piles of bleached bones—pitiful relics of humanity—and sometimes a skeleton seemed to wink and smile knowingly, or rattle its bones in greeting. Welcome redhaired stranger! Welcome you with eyes of death! Welcome man who rides under a curse! Will you stay with us? Why do you ride by so fast?

But Kane only stopped when he came to Sebbei. Through gates left open—for who would enter? who would leave?—his horse plodded, past rows of empty buildings and down silent streets. But the streets were kept reasonably clear, and an occasional house showed occupants—sad faces that stared at him with little curiosity. None challenged him; no one asked him any question. This was Sebbei, where one lived amidst death, where one waited only for death. Sebbei with its few inhabitants living in its silent shell—mice rustling through a giant's skeleton. To Kane Sebbei seemed far more eerie than those towns peopled solely by the dead through which he had ridden.

At the town's one operating tavern he had halted. Assailed for a moment by the uncanny lifelessness of the city, he paused in his

saddle and licked his cold lips with tongue dry from travel. Over his right shoulder protruded the hilt of the long sword he wore slung across his back, and its scabbard rattled when he shook the tightness from his corded muscles. Lightly he slid from the saddle and entered the tavern, gazing speculatively at the incurious eyes that greeted him. Eyes so dull, so lifeless, they seemed clouded with corpseslike glaze.

I am Kane, he had told those who drank there. His voice had echoed loudly, for in Sebbei they speak in hushed whispers. I have grown tired in crossing this desert, and I plan to stay here in your land for a time, he had explained. A few had nodded and the rest returned to their thoughts, Kane shrugged and began to ask questions of some of the townsmen, who listlessly gave him the answers he sought.

At length someone pointed out a faded old man who sat at a table in one corner, his back straight but his face broken. Here was one called Gavein, who served as Lord Mayor of Sebbei—a somewhat ironic dignity, for his duties were few in this town of ghosts, and prestige only a half-hearted echo of tradition. Gavein regarded Kane without comprehension when he attempted to explain his wishes to the mayor, but after a moment he seemed to awaken from his reverie. There are many empty houses, he told Kane. Take whatever you require—there are palaces or hovels, as you please. Most of our city has remained untenanted all these years since the plague, and only ghosts will take issue with your occupancy. Food you may purchase here at our market, or raise what you desire. Our needs are few these days, so you may soon grow tired of our monotonous fare. This tavern furnishes our amusements, if you feel inclined to such things. Stay with us then for as long as your spirit desires. Do as you wish, for no man will pry into your affairs. We are a dying people here in Sebbei. Our visitors are rare and few stay for long. Our thoughts and manner are our own, and we care not what chance brings you among us. It is our wish only to be left alone with our thoughts. We in turn

leave you with yours. And Gavein tugged the worn folds of his cloak closer about his thin shoulders and returned to his dreams.

So Kane wandered through the deserted streets of Sebbei, watched by only an occasional pair of clouded eyes from the few inhabited dwellings. At length he took residence in an old merchant's villa, where the rich furnishings appealed to his taste for luxury, and whose neglected gardens along a small lake promised solace to his anguished spirit.

But he lived there not alone, for often there came to him a strange girl named Rehhaile, whom many called a sorceress. Only Rehhaile among those of Sebbei showed more than distracted aloofness to the stranger who had stopped in their city. An outsider herself, Rehhaile spent long hours in Kane's company, and she ministered to him in many ways.

Thus came Kane to Sebbei in Demornte. Demornte where death has lain, and life will not linger.

II. Death Returns to Demornte

Death came again to Demornte. Nine gaunt horses beat their hooves with hollow echo through the silent streets of Demornte, past the overgrown fields, past the empty, staring houses, past the mocking smiles of skeletons. Death had returned to Demornte flying varied standards—idealism, sadism, duty, vengeance, adventure. New banners, but it was death that marched beneath them, and the omniscient eyes of the deserted houses, of the laughing skulls recognized death and welcomed it home.

Only nine men. Many had started, seasoned mercenaries hired with Gaethaa's wealth, adventurers drawn by the boldness of the mission, men of hate with festered scores to settle with Kane. But the way had been hard, and some had fallen on the trail, others had deserted when they thought more about the man whom they were seeking. At Omlipttei outlaws had mistaken them for a troop of the Lomarni guard; their ambush had slain many. And when they at last had reached Demornte, many had not trusted the triple spell which Cereb Ak-Cetee swore would protect them from the dreaded plague. They had tried to desert; Gaethaa had pronounced them traitors and thus servants of evil, and he had ordered all deserters executed. The fight had been short and vicious, for these were hardened warriors. At the end there were left only Gaethaa and eight of his men to ride to Sebbei, where Cereb Ak-Cetee's magic had shown Kane to be staying.

We are enough, said Gaethaa. We must not give this demon a chance to escape his doom. And so they had followed him into the ghostland of Demornte.

Gaethaa—called also Gaethaa the Crusader, the Good, the Avenger—had fallen heir to extensive baronial estates in Kamathae. As a boy he had spent most of his time in the company of his family's men-at-arms. He had grown to despise the pampered luxury and wasteful existence of his class, and to yearn for adventures like those the men talked of by the fires. At manhood he had resolved to use his wealth to fight the battles of the oppressed, to seek out and destroy the creatures of evil who preyed upon mankind. He was a fanatic in the cause of good, and once he had recognized a center of evil, he trampled over every obstacle that would hinder him from burning it clean. For several years he had marched forth against petty tyrants, evil wizards, robber barons, outlaw packs, and monsters human and inhuman. Always he had vanquished evil in the name of good, shackled chaos with law. And now he rode against Kane, a name that had always fascinated him, but which he had half regarded as

legendary, until he began to realize the truth that lay in the fantastic tales of this man. Kane would be a magnificent challenge for Gaethaa the Crusader.

Alidore had followed him from the first. A younger son of impoverished Lartroxian gentry, he had left home early and had passed through Kamathae when Gaethaa was organizing his first mission. Gaethaa's idealism was mirrored in Alidore, and the young man had joined him with unfailing enthusiasm. Through all of Gaethaa's campaigns he had followed faithfully and fought bravely against all odds. Now he was Gaethaa's lieutenant and most trusted friend. Alidore would follow wherever his lord should lead and fight beside him with the same unfaltering zeal of idealism.

Cereb Ak-Cetee was a young wizard from the plains of Tranodeli. He looked like a gawking hayseed choirboy in his silken mage's cloak, but he was very far from harmless. Cereb needed wealth and experience before he could pursue his training to the not inconsiderable height of his ambitions. Gaethaa had noted the sorcerer's skill in penetrating defenses and ferreting out fugitives, and he paid Cereb handsomely for his services.

Next in rank—although Cereb's position was ambiguous—came Mollyl from the ill-famed island of Pellin in the Thovnosian Empire. Mollyl was a dark man who smiled only when another screamed in agony. His total lack of fear—perhaps he lost it in the exultation of killing—made him indispensable to Gaethaa in battle. Mollyl took Gaethaa's wealth, but he would probably follow him without pay, so long as his lord offered him new fields of delight.

Also from the Thovnosian Empire, but from the island of Josten, came Jan. Ten years ago when Kane's pirate feet had terrorized the island empire, Jan had seen his family butchered, and Kane himself had chopped off his right hand when Jan had tried to fight back against the raiders. Since then Jan had laced a

padded base to the stump of his wrist, and from the base he could affix either a blunt hook or one with needle tip and razor-sharp inner curve. He had joined Gaethaa for vengeance.

Although aging, Anmuspi the Archer still boasted he could thread an axehead at a hundred paces. Few who had seen the mercenary shoot would care to call his boast. Anmuspi's luck had run out in Nostoblet in Lartroxia South. A palace revolution had failed, his employers were crucified, and Anmuspi was put on the slave block. Gaethaa had bought him after hearing the auctioneer proclaim his skill as an archer. For Anmuspi it meant only another shift in employers, and he followed Gaethaa's every command faithfully. For Anmuspi right and wrong were not his to question; obedience was his code.

Dron Missa was a footloose adventurer from far Waldann. His people were a warrior race, and even among them Missa excelled as a swordsman. Gaethaa promised him adventure, so Dron Missa had exuberantly come along for the ride.

Two others sought vengeance. One was Bell, a peasant from the Myceum Mountains. Bell was fully as stupid as he was brutal and powerful. Five years before Kane had sacrificed two of Bell's sisters as part of an ill-fated sorcerous experiment. Bell never tired of telling people what he planned to do to Kane someday.

Sed tho'Dosso listened carefully to Bell's descriptions of torture, for like Jan and Bell he had a score to settle with Kane. Several months previous when Kane had been organizing the desert raiders of Lomarn, Sed tho'Dosso had offered resistance on the grounds that he should lead since his band was the largest. Kane had peremptorily smashed Sed tho'Dosso's forces and had left the bandit chieftain staked in the sun to die. By a freak chance he had escaped death, and when he heard of Gaethaa's mission in crossing the Lomarn, Sed tho'Dosso eagerly joined him.

So they rode through Demornte, each man silent with his own thoughts. Death rode nine gaunt horses through the familiar streets of Demornte, and dead Demornte bade Death welcome.

III. Ripples and Shadows

The moon cast pale light upon Rehhaile's slender body as she watched Kane moodily toss stones into the lake beneath their perch. Goose pimples rose on her tanned skin, and she wriggled over the velvet moss of the bank to press her shivering form against his. His body was warm, though his mind was distant, and she rested her head against his shoulder in contentment.

Rehhaile did not share the gloomy apathy, the bitter despair of her people. She loved the sunlight while the others generally kept to their shops and houses. As a result her lean figure was tanned an even brown that matched her unbound hair, and there was a strong hint of freckles across her face. Her features were somewhat boldly shaped, although not to the point of losing femininity. Her breasts were small and firm, her hips slim—making her appear a few years younger than her twenty years.

Bunching her long fingers over the massive muscles of Kane's shoulders and back, she began to massage them, trying to shape the knotted muscles to the pattern of the ripples on the lake. Kane seemed to ignore her, but she reached out with her mind and sensed that she was drawing him into lazy arousal.

For Rehhaile was blind, her wide eyes altogether sightless. Her

mother had died from the plague while Rehhaile yet lay in her womb. Her father had sworn that death should not take all from him, and a physician had quickly torn her from the dead womb. Both father and physician died of the plague within the week, but somehow Rehhaile had survived while all about her Demornte was seared by the plague. Someone had taken care of her, for Demornte was a land of motherless children and childless mothers. Later she made a living by whatever way she could, for the most part hanging around Sebbei's sole tavern.

But Rehhaile had been blind since birth. And yet she had in place of sight an infinitely more precious power of vision. Her macabre birth, a genetic mutation, some whim of the gods—the reason was unknowable and unimportant. She was given a psychic talent that provided a far more wondrous sense of perception than any human eyes could afford.

Rehhaile could reach out to link her own mind with another. Through this psychic contact she could share the other person's perception of his surroundings, in effect see through another's eyes, hear through his ears, feel through his fingers. And along with this sharing of sensory impulses, Rehhaile could actually sense the feelings of another mind—not so much read the thoughts, but experience for herself the myriad emotions that drift through the corridors of the mind. Her incredible talent to see into another human mind established Rehhaile as a sorceress in the eyes of the townspeople of Sebbei, and in their despair they accepted this without concern or curiosity.

Because she could perceive the emotional turmoil of others, Rehhaile shared the distress of that soul she touched. If there was pain, she tried to soothe it in whatever way she could. For the people of Demornte nothing could be done. Theirs was an inconceivable, inconsolable grief, and their emotions were a burned out wasteland that could never be healed. The people of Sebbei largely ignored Rehhaile just as they ignored everything

except their bitter memories. Rehhaile lived with them because there was nothing else she could do. And in sharing their thoughts, she shared their joyless depression, a steeping in gloom that almost overwhelmed her own soul.

The rare travellers whom chance brought to Sebbei were a marvel to her. She bathed in the exotic colors of their thoughts, finding a universe of unimagined interest and vitality even in the mind of a stray camel driver. She often tried to persuade these strangers to take her along with them across the desert, but inevitably the knowledge of Rehhaile's witch powers would turn them cold to her appeal.

Then Kane had come to Sebbei, and she had experienced worlds of sensation unlike any she had ever imagined a human mind could hold. Kane had been a whirling labyrinth to Rehhaile. Most of his emotions were altogether alien to her, and many frightened her with their strangeness. But she had recognized the awful need for rest that screamed within him—the unanswerable longing for peace. So she had gone to him to minister to his agony in the arts that only she knew, and through the months of companionship they had known, it seemed to Rehhaile that the pain had somewhat dimmed within Kane.

She tugged a shock of red hair playfully. "Hey! What do you see down there in the pool?"

His mind was cold, far away. "Ripples on the water like the passing of years. Man enters life and there is a splash. His life sends out ripples—small ripples for a little man, huge waves for a great man—waves that overwhelmed the tiny ripples, wash them away or remold them. But in the end it is all the same, for the ripples go out into the lake of life and soon die away, to leave the lake smooth for new lives or stones."

She scratched lightly with her nails. "Make that up just now?"

"No. I heard that analogy from the sage Monpelloni whom I studied under in Churtannts." Rehhaile did not know that Churtannts had lain in ruins for over a century. "Only I don't fit the frame he proposed here. I'm something marooned on the surface of existence. Instead of a short splash, I keep floating there, struggling about and making an endless succession of waves."

"I can see you there. Like an old bat fallen in and flopping about the pool." She dug her nails in deeper. "Come back to me, Kane! Don't you love me?"

He rolled over so abruptly she nearly slipped off the bank. His cold blue eyes bored into her blind face. Those eyes—how they frightened her with the promise of death that lurked within! But now Rehhaile thought she sensed an even more haunted glare.

"No, Rehhaile!" He said with slow intensity. "Can't you understand! Your life is only a brief ripple across the pool, and mine is a constant flow of waves into infinity! Your ripple is only noted in passing and swept aside!"

She shivered with a coldness not of the wind.

"And do you love me?" he returned.

"No!" she answered him softly. "For you there can be no love. I can only pity you and try to soothe that which can never be healed."

"I think you begin to understand," Kane said with a bitter laugh. Then soon they lay together under the pale moon. And about them the ghosts of dead Demornte slipped by unheeded.

IV. The Crusader in Sebbei

"Their faces are as empty as the skulls we've passed!" commented Dron Missa, craning his long neck to stare down a seated townsman who stolidly watched them ride by. "Bunch of fish faces! I've eaten baked fish that had more intelligence in their boiled eyes than these cretins."

"Thought they ate only flesh in Waldann—raw flesh at that," scoffed Cereb Ak-Cetee.

Missa laughed unappreciatively. "Nothing wrong with raw flesh. Tastes good with a little salt. Once ate a squirrel raw on a bet—whiskers to tail with the thing still kicking. I've hated the little furry bastards ever since."

"How about keeping your mind on finding that tavern," interrupted Gaethaa caustically. His nerves had been on edge since entering Sebbei. Ruined cities were no novelty to him. But the utter lack of curiosity shown by the people was unnerving. Their indifference upon seeing a band of heavily armed strangers ride into their city was unsettling and something of a subtle insult.

The first person they encountered in this city of ghosts had been a disheveled fat man with a yellow streaked beard. He was sitting loosely before a stagnant fountain near the unguarded city gates. With a vapid expression he had watched their approach, then scurried off giggling when Alidore stopped to question him. It was not an auspicious welcome.

Several others that they met had turned away or closed their doors when hailed, and Gaethaa had grimly recalled the stories heard while crossing the Lomarn that in Sebbei there dwelled only ghosts and madmen. Still it seemed evident now that they would confront no organized opposition from the townspeople. This would make their mission one of more direct attack—Gaethaa had been prepared to use more subtle tactics should it have developed that Kane had established himself as ruler of the dead city.

Finally, persistent questioning of those they met indicated that someone named Gavein, who held the office of Lord Mayor, was more or less responsible for central authority in Sebbei. This Gavein could likely be found at Jethrann's tavern. Directions to Jethrann's tavern had been given with the provincial assumption that a stranger knew his way through the city to begin with. Sebbei was an old city, laid out in chaotic growth, and its narrow streets were disturbingly labyrinthian.

After several wrong turns and unenlightening inquiries, they came upon a brown haired girl seated under a tree. She seemed to be asleep, for she failed to notice them until the riders drew close. Then her head snapped toward their approach, face wild in an uncanny wide-eyed look of fright.

"By Thoem—at least here's somebody that doesn't have both feet in the grave!" smiled Dron Missa appreciatively. "Hey, Miss! Care to help some bone dry travellers find a cool place to rest? We're looking for a tavern—Jethrann's place."

The girl rose to her feet and began to back away from them, her face oddly contorted in fear. Gaethaa spoke quietly in reassuring tones, explaining that he and his men were strangers passing through Sebbei, that they...

She turned from them and broke into a run. As she dashed from the shade, sunlight caught the flash of tanned limbs beneath

her short dress of green trimmed brown suede. Hooves struck the earth in faster rhythm. Mocking laughter overtook her. Defiance edging her squeal of fright, the girl was jerked from the street by a bronzed arm and swung onto a saddle.

Mollyl laughed as he pinioned her lashing arms against her side. "Cut it, sweetheart!" he grinned. "Young girl like you must be real lonely here with all these dried up old scarecrows! Is that why you shy away when you see a real man, sweetheart? Maybe I could teach you the right way to say hello to a stranger."

"All right, Mollyl! We don't want to frighten her any more than we have already!" Gaethaa growled. "Stop squirming, child! We're only trying to get directions to Jethrann's tavern. Please forgive my men's lapse of breeding—we meant no harm to you. Now can you please tell us the way?"

Fear still lined her features, but her struggles grew less. Helplessly she perched on the saddle edge, crushed against Mollyl's hard chest, "It isn't far," she answered haltingly. "Keep on down this street maybe half a mile. You can begin to see the market square on down to your left then. The tavern is on the square."

"My thanks, child," Gaethaa returned. "We were on the right track at least. Guess our preconception of a market square doesn't fit this ghost town."

The girl wriggled hopefully, seeking to slip away. The expression of unaccountable fear still marred her face. Cereb Ak-Cetee grunted curiously and leaned toward her, peering at her face. Frowning in puzzlement he moved his long fingers before her eyes. She drew away with a shudder when his hand brushed her flesh. The wizard examined her speculatively.

Gaethaa spoke in command, and Mollyl reluctantly permitted his captive to slip to the ground. Shaking herself as if to shed

some taint, the girl stepped back, still staring at them in dread fascination. Abruptly she whirled and disappeared into an alley.

"She's blind," observed Cereb Ak-Cetee as they rode away. "Did you notice? No focus. Her eyes are sightless."

"What do you mean—blind?" Alidore exploded. "She damn well acted like she could see good enough. Had a strange look to her eyes, granted. But she can't have been blind."

"I said she was blind," the wizard persisted tight lipped. "I'm not at all sure how she perceives things, but I know enough to recognize blind eyes when they present themselves to me."

"Yeah—Ok!" Alidore answered in dismissal. He was not about to provoke the wizard's petulance.

"Hey, Bell!" Dron Missa whispered. "Cereb says we just took directions from a blind girl. Doesn't that ring a bell even in your thick skull?"

"You're funny, Missa," Bell rumbled. "Real funny. Yeah, you're a scream. You ought to become a jester. You'd be good. You're really a riot."

Alidore wondered how long it would take Dron Missa to push Bell too far—or vice versa. The Waldann's sword arm was among the deadliest Alidore had witnessed, but Bell could tear him into quarters if he ever got the drop on him.

"That's it!" Jan pointed with his hook. "Hell, man! I can smell that wine from across the square!"

"Good!" Gaethaa exclaimed. "And this part of town is as stagnant as the rest of the place. Doesn't look like there's any kind of organized force here, but we can't be sure what Kane will have done. Looks like he's just lying low so far though. So we'll play it by ear until we know the set up. Stroll on into the tavern just like we were on our way across Demornte and stopped to

rest. Alidore and I will start stalking with this Gavein—assuming he's here—and sound him out. Then we'll take it from there. But no mention of Kane by any of you until I make the move. And easy on the wine—things might happen fast."

Tethering their mounts before the three-storied stone structure, Gaethaa and his band entered the open doorway. Inside the air was cool, albeit somewhat stale. A small number of men stood at the bar and sat at small tables occupied with their drinks. Low-voiced conversation broke off as the riders sauntered across the smoky room to the bar—a conspicuous entrance even had strangers been commonplace in Sebbei. Still the townspeople returned to their incurious aloofness once the initial stir had settled, and the murmur of quiet voices began again.

Jethrann, the scar-faced innkeeper, took their coin with an empty smile and brought them wine. In response to Gaethaa's guarded inquiry he indicated the Lord Mayor, who sat alone and half asleep at his usual table.

Wiping the wine from his mustache, Gaethaa carried his lung across to Gavein's table, followed by Alidore who brought along the bottle. "Mind if I join you?" he asked.

Gavein shrugged. "Suit yourself."

"Have a drink with us?" suggested Alidore, already filling the mayor's empty mug.

"Thoughtful of you," Gavein observed. "Bunch of well armed toughs comes stomping into the place when we see maybe a dozen strangers in a year, and right away they want to share a bottle with the mayor. Maybe mercenaries are better mannered now than in the old days, but I doubt it. So thanks for the drink, and what do you want?"

"My name is Gaethaa," he introduced himself, deciding to come directly to the point. This gambit fizzled when Gavein made

no show of recognition at the name. But Gaethaa was not a vain man, and he realized that it was unlikely tales of his exploits had penetrated empty Demornte.

He shifted to another approach. "I see my name is not known here in Sebbei—but then there are many names known far wider than Gaethaa. Take the name Kane for instance—there's a man whose fame has reached across our world. I seem to have heard that Kane came through Demornte once—perhaps you've met him?"

"I know a man of that name," Gavein admitted.

Gaethaa caught Alidore's eyes significantly. "Perhaps this isn't the same man. The Kane I have in mind is a giant of a man—stands about six feet and is built like he had the muscles of three strong men stretched upon a single frame. He has sort of a coarse face, has red hair and often a short beard. Generally carries his sword slung across his back in the Carsulyal fashion. Left-handed—although he's a deadly swordsman with either arm. His eyes though—people remember his eyes. Has blue eyes with some sort of insane menace in their gaze..."

"We're talking about the same Kane," Gavein grudgingly acknowledged. "What about him?"

Gaethaa forced himself to speak noncommittally. "So Kane is in Sebbei, is he?"

The mayor considered his wine cup. "Yeah, Kane's here in our city—Thoem knows why he stays. Lives out in the Nandai's old villa. Keeps to himself—Rehhaile's the only one who sees much of him. You some friend of his?"

Gaethaa laughed and rose to his feet. His men along the bar wavered hands near weapon hilts at the movement, but halted when they saw the eager triumph lighting the Crusader's long face. "No—Kane is no friend of mine! Far from it!" he intoned

loudly. The townspeople gaped at him in startled amazement.

"In the world outside your ghostland men know me as Gaethaa the Avenger!" he announced. "I have made it my mission in life to hunt down and destroy the agents of evil who bring death and deprivation to the helpless! Too long has evil held sway over our lives—too long have the creatures of evil run unchecked among mankind! Evil has ruled the lives of men with the consuming might of merciless force—and mankind has had to bow to its terror or else be destroyed! But I have sworn to destroy the servants of evil whatever they hold mankind in thrall! I have time and again done battle with the forces of evil, and each time I have triumphed and destroyed with the greater strength of good! Order has mastered chaos—I have fought evil on its own ground, and with the superior power of good I have conquered! Conquered because I have had the courage to confront evil face to face—because I have turned against evil the very violence with which it holds mankind under its heel—because I have met force with force and destroyed brute power with brute power!"

Gaethaa's face was bathed in demonic transfiguration as he breathed fierce sincerity into his explosive diatribe. His listeners watched him with the awestricken attention commanded by saints and madmen, and even here in Demornte none dared to break into the spell of ferocious fanaticism he spun for them.

Seeming to recollect himself, Gaethaa paused in his harangue and gestured toward his men. "These are my followers," he explained hoarsely. "A small army at the moment, but they're picked fighters and every man a seasoned and fearless warrior! Many have followed my command through other hard fought campaigns, and all have endured sufficient hardships and danger just in winning through to Sebbei to put old sagas to shame! For I have come to Sebbei with my men to seek out this creature who calls himself Kane! I am here to deliver your city from Kane!"

Gavein shrugged uneasily, uncertain how all this was going to

involve him and his townspeople, "But Kane does nothing to us here in Sebbei. He keeps to himself in a villa at the edge of our city, as I've said. We don't even see him except when he comes by from time to time to buy provisions. Why don't you take your quarrel elsewhere?"

Gaethaa was aghast. Stunned by the mayor's indifference, he turned to Alidore to see if madness had claimed all present. Alidore cleared his throat and suggested in Kamathaen, "It may well be, milord, that we underestimated the parochial isolation of these people. Incredible as it seems, I don't think they have any idea who Kane might be. Why else would they have permitted him to remain in their city?"

Once more assured, the Avenger addressed his nervous audience. "Obviously then you people don't realize what manner of fiend is living here in your city! It seems incredible in view of his dark history that he hasn't already turned on you—Tloluvin only knows what demonic scheme he has in mind for you and your land! I've pitted myself against some utterly ruthless black hearted monsters in human guise in the past, but this Kane could be the most evil man ever to walk the earth! His crimes are so numerous, so colossal in infamy that most people believe Kane nothing more than wild legend! I once thought him legendary myself until in my far searching crusade against the forces of evil, I began to cut across his blood stained trail too often for me to doubt his existence among us!

"Legends—there are countless legends if you travel far enough to hear them! It's astonishing how far back these tales go in man's history. A lot of these things may well be spurious or latter day reinterpretations, but there are enough common themes to make me give serious consideration to many points. These legends tell that Kane is immortal—further that he was one of the first true men! They say Kane rebelled against his creator—some forgotten god who had attempted to create in mankind a perfect race

modeled according to his own warped ideal. This god had failed many times before he finally created a golden race that he kept in a sheltered paradise for his own amusement. It's not clear how, but evidently Kane provoked this golden race of men to revolt from their paradise existence—even killed his own brother when he tried to prevent this. Kane's defiance and murderous violence resulted in the destruction of the golden age, with the subsequent scattering of humanity across the ancient earth. Kane himself was doomed by this god with the curse of immortality! A curse of eternal wandering, never to know peace, haunted by the spectre of the violence he introduced to mankind—marked an outcast from humanity by the brand of his eyes, a killer's eyes! Only through violence such as he engendered can he die, but throughout the centuries no man has been able to destroy Kane in this his own element!

"Well, that's the gist of the oldest legends, and of course you can't tell where to draw the line with these old tales. But there are too many other legends and sagas over the centuries in which the name of Kane appears to lay this entirely to chance or to recurrent poetic theme! A few facts appear certain. Kane has lived for at least a few centuries—he is not the first agent of evil endowed with preternatural longevity by any means—and during this time he has brought nothing but death and destruction wherever he has wandered! Catastrophic violence seems to slither behind him like a shadow! And Kane has generally been the author of this bloodshed and ruin! He has engaged in the most hideous acts of black sorcery—the wizards of Carsulyal even drove him from their land in abhorrence at one time! He has been a pirate, a bandit, an assassin—committed countless numbers of violent deeds! He has gathered and led gigantic armies and navies against peaceful lands for purpose of conquest and pillage! He has ruled nations as the blackest of tyrants. He has been involved with—often instigated—numberless conspiracies to overthrow lawful governments! His name has become a byword for

treachery over the centuries!

"I'm not just rehashing a bunch of fantastic legends for you to hear! Men who are with me today will attest to his guilt—they have seen Kane's insane deeds with their own eyes!" It was essential to Gaethaa that Gavein and his people recognize the justice of his mission—fully appreciate the infamy of Kane. "Talk to them! Just ask either Jan or Molly! there what the name of Kane means to their fellows in the Thovnosian Empire! Ask Bell what Kane did to the people of his native Myceum Mountains! Ask Sod tho'Dosso to describe for you the murder

Kane and his bandits made upon caravans crossing the Lomarn here at your doorsteps only a few months ago! I've talked enough now—go on and question these men!"

Gaethaa looked about him, earnest eyes seeking the faces of the townspeople—faces that turned away in frightened confusion. Finally Gavein essayed to speak, blinking at the Avenger as if hoping he and his men would suddenly fade off into the late afternoon shadows. His response gave Gaethaa his greatest shock of the long, trying day.

"Please! I don't really care to hear your tales of ancient legends and black evil run rampant in the world beyond our land. We of Demornte have quite enough to consider in our own sorrows. You speak to us of murder and destruction—but we have watched the death of our entire land and its people. Kane's crimes mean nothing to us here; we care nothing and ask nothing of the outside world. What happens or has happened there does not concern us."

The paleness of his face made his lips a red wound. Checking his hand that longed to seize sword hilt, Gaethaa thundered incredulously, "Do you mean to say that you intend to protect Kane!"

Gavein looked at him with a touch of almost pity in his tired face. "You misunderstand. We care nothing of your quarrel. If it is between you and Kane, then go to him with it. The two of you settle it according to whatever laws seem best to you. In Sebbei we ask only to be left alone with our sorrow. As regards your 'mission,' we will neither help you nor hinder you in any manner whatsoever. It's your fight—do what you wish. But leave us alone!"

Shaking his head in astonishment, Gaethaa turned to Alidore for counsel. "They're obsessed, you know!" he exclaimed in sick pity. "The whole land is like this it seems. So obsessed with this one thing that they've lost all perspective! I don't think a man here really understands anything I've tried to tell them!"

"I'll agree it looks hopeless for them. At any rate they'll pose no threat to us," Alidore observed. "Kane's backed himself into a corner this time, and it appears that he has only himself to turn to for help. Ask the old man to tell us where Kane's villa is."

"And get lost again?" Gaethaa growled. "Got a better idea. We'll let him lead us there in person."

Invited to accompany them, Gavein protested that it was not his affair. But when Bell and Sed tho'Dosso eagerly stepped toward him at Gaethaa's nod, the Lord Mayor gloomily rose to his feet and was escorted into the street outside.

V. To Trap a Tiger in His Lair

Rehhaile frantically hurried through the narrow streets of Sebbei, her mind still crawling with fear and loathing. The shock of confronting Gaethaa and his men had been brutal, and her concern for Kane was obscured by the pall of revulsion she had felt on touching their thoughts. Her soul felt outraged at the contact. Never had she experienced such a barrage of depraved, bestial images and cravings. Kane's mind was altogether alien to her, and she took care never to reach too deep within its tortuous depths. But among the thoughts of Gaethaa's band outright cruelty reveled alongside demented lusting, and Rehhaile's mind still cringed in memory, sick and soiled by the touch.

She ran along recklessly, stumbling in her haste, avoiding jarring collision time and again by the closest margins. To her sightless mind the twisting alleys of Sebbei assumed a bewildering pattern of clarity and darkness. Wherever possible Rehhaile cast out her mind to draw sight from another. At fortunate moments she made contact with one of the townspeople who was in the vicinity and through whose eyes she could see a portion of the course she followed. But in deserted Sebbei such chance encounters were too few, and more often Rehhaile found her path blotted out in darkness. Where there were no other's eyes through which she could see, she attempted to make a detour by reaching out to touch another nearby mind and follow a circuitous route along this region of light. But this wasted too many invaluable minutes, and Rehhaile was forced to plunge into

the darkened segments of the labyrinth frequently—there to rely on shadowy hints from distant minds, or to feet her way along blindly. Although she knew the streets of Sebbei well, these passages of absolute blindness placed deadly obstacles in her search for Kane.

As she had felt certain she would, Rehhaile found Kane at the abandoned Nandai villa. Gasping for breath she ran through the walled gardens, her remaining steps made certain as Kane watched her disheveled approach. Kane had been half asleep, moodily contemplating the late afternoon sun from the shade of a densely laced roof of floral vine. A nearly drained amphora of thin Demornte wine leaned beside him, still damp from the cool waters of the lake. Alongside rested a bowl of strawberry domes.

"Hello, Rehhaile," he greeted her thickly, rising to his feet at the panic that lined her face. "Hey, what the hell's the matter? Somebody chasing you?"

"Kane!" Exhaustion forced her words out in strangled bursts. "Kane! You're in danger here! There're some men in Sebbei! They've come to kill you! They've been searching for you for weeks! They know you're in Sebbei! They'll be coming here to kill you as soon as they find out where you are! They'll be here any minute! They're going to kill you!"

Desperately Kane fought to command his semi-drunken faculties. "Men in Sebbei looking for me!" he exploded. "How many? Who are they? How are they armed? How do you know they're on my trail?"

Rehhaile poured out an incoherent account of her accosted by Gaethaa and his men, babbling frenziedly of strange men with harsh minds and thoughts of violence and death. Her words were disjointed, attempting to convey sensations for which language failed to accommodate—but Kane immediately understood the imminent danger of his position. Cursing bitterly the monumental

carelessness into which his despair had lulled him, Kane questioned her sharply for details. She followed him into the villa as he dashed about buckling on his sword and searching for an extra quiver of bolts for his crossbow.

"Kane—what are you going to do?" Rehhaile moaned. "Are you going to try to stand them off from the villa?"

Kane's boot caught the edge of a bench, and he reeled away clumsily, slapping at his shin and snarling angrily. "I'm not sure what I'll do! Nine seasoned professionals make tough odds in an open fight! And they must be damned good to have trailed me to Sebbei—Tloluvin knows why, although that's beside the point at the moment! If I wait for them here, they can bottle me up like a bear in his cave! I can run for it, but if they've followed me this far, there's no reason to hope they won't hunt me down somewhere else in Demornte or the desert beyond!"

With practiced hands Kane worked the action of his crossbow. He felt grim satisfaction that he had permitted no rust or dirt to collect on his weapons—at least he had not fallen altogether under the spell of dead Demornte! "The best chance is going to be for me to get out of this villa, but to stay here in Sebbei. I can use the empty buildings for cover, and strike back at them on my own terms! These bastards won't be the first hunters to make the mistake of daring their prey within its lair!"

He started for the garden gate, when Rehhaile abruptly cried out a warning. "Kane! Get back! Those men are almost here! You'll never make it to cover!"

"That tears it!" growled Kane. Wheeling about he darted back into the villa—cursing vehemently in several languages. Quickly he gained the second floor of the dwelling and glanced through a window in the direction Rehhaile indicated. The sun cast long shadows away from the group of riders who stood near the edge of Sebbei watching the villa expectantly.

"You can see them now," Rehhaile observed.

"Yeah, I see them!" Kane rasped. "And they seem to know just where to find me! Is that Gavein with them? Wonder what's holding them back now!"

At the outskirts of Sebbei Gaethaa halted with his men to consider the villa before them. Beyond the old wall extended a periphery of newer structure—shops, inns, estates of the wealthy—a scattered suburban area outside the dirt, noise and stench of the crowded old city, but still within the confines of Sebbei's widely flung outer wall. Only now the outer wall guarded a ghost city from nonexistent raiders, and the forest was seeking to reclaim the outer city unchallenged by any hand.

The old Nandai villa had been situated somewhat apart from the neighboring structures. It stood against a small lake on one side, a lake which curved back upon the inner wall in one direction and extended toward the low outer wall in the other. Rotted piers tenanted by half-sunken vessels reached out across its quiet surface, and the lake shore was overgrown with tall reeds and low shrubs. The overgrown gardens encircled the old villa, and outside garden wall there had once been tilled fields. These fields were now in weeds with a sparse growth of young palms and pine trees, but there was little or no cover afforded here, and the villa was in effect surrounded by a clearing.

"No chance of riding up on him unobserved," Alidore commented.

Gaethaa grunted acknowledgement. Turning to Cereb Ak-Cetee, he asked, "Gavein still swears he knows of no protective magic that Kane has invoked to guard his lair. How about it?"

The wizard absent-mindedly picked at his nose and stared at the villa. "Well, there's no immediate evidence that we'll be

dealing with sorcery here. I think we've caught Kane totally off guard. Give you odds we could ride in on him right now and take him."

Mollyl looked at Gavein knowingly and whispered something to Jan, who laughed and stropped his gleaming hook across his leather pants. "Now, Gavein," Mollyl grinned, "I just know you're telling us the truth about old Kane living out here all alone and all. But Jan here thinks maybe you might be holding back something on us—maybe Kane keeps some men around here as bodyguards, or maybe Kane has some little sorcerous devices waiting for his enemies. You sure you got your story straight, Gavein? You're not going to let Jan change your mind for you now, are you?" Gavein shuddered, eyeing the razor-edged hook in fascination.

"Cut it out, Mollyl," Gaethaa commanded. "I believe him. These people are too gutless to lie to us."

"Cereb, make damn sure Kane doesn't have anything in store for us we aren't expecting! The black hearted devil didn't live this long on the strength of his reputation alone. Others have been destroyed by Kane when they thought he was helpless, and I'm not about to believe we'll walk in and find him snoring away on a pile of empty wine jugs!"

The wizard slipped to the ground and began to remove a number of items from his voluminous packs. "Let you know for certain in a minute. But we'll end up wasting our advantage of surprise at this rate."

"Kane has no reason to expect us," Alidore pointed out.

"No, we don't look too suspicious, do we now." Cereb Ak-Cetee shrugged and bent to his work. His movements were certain, and his slender fingers arranged his paraphernalia with professional confidence. For all his youth, the Tranodeli was well

on his way to becoming a powerful wizard. In his own mind, Cereb had decided to seek tutelage from one of the old Carsultyal masters after he had gained experience and wealth of a few more of Gaethaa's missions.

Carefully he filled a copper bowl with water from a canteen, poured a few droplets of oily fluid from three vials, then dusted the opalescent surface with tiny pinches of powdered substance from other containers taken from his kit. He squatted over the bowl, his bony knees poking tightly against his robe, and began to chant into the bowl, but its surface remained clouded. Abruptly a tiny mote of red fire seemed to dance upon the center of the bowl. The surface shimmered faintly for a moment, then vaporized with a rush of thick fumes. The red flame lingered sullenly for a second, then winked out.

Dusting his hands on his cloak, Cereb straightened and began to collect his accoutrements. "As I said, nothing," he explained. "Any forces of magic connected with the villa before us would have been reflected on the surface of my bowl. As you observed, the only response was a flicker of crimson. This I interpret as representing Kane himself, who if all tales are true has sufficient sorcerous influences about him to elicit a reflection."

He chuckled affably. "I'd say we've caught Kane completely by surprise. They claim he's a good enough wizard in his own right, but so far as I know Kane's never made a sorcerer's pact with any god or demon. That means he has no powers to turn to for immediate assistance. Without some form of patron deity to call upon, a sorcerer—no matter how adept he may be—requires a lot of time, effort and materials to cast any sort of effective spell. Black magic isn't some cheap charlatan's trick you can perform with a finger snap and a puff of smoke, after all. Well, Kane hasn't had any time, and I doubt if he has any sorcerous materials at hand either. He's all yours, Milord Gaethaa."

"Well done, Cereb," Gaethaa returned with a thin smile. "We'll

put your words to a test then. All right men, we'll play it like Kane doesn't know we're searching for him yet. The road to the outer wall leads straight past the entrance to the villa. We'll ride along it like we were headed on out of Sebbei minding our own business. Then once we get abreast of the villa, we'll rush the place. With luck he won't suspect anything until that moment. The garden gate will pose no problem, and once through, Mollyl, Jan, Bell take the front with me; Sed and Missa take the back with Alidore; Anmuspi and Cereb hold back to see if he gets past us. Cereb, I'm counting on you to be alert for any sorcerous defenses. Gavein, you can go now. So act nonchalant then, and let's get him!"

Released, Gavein gloomily watched them ride away toward the villa. He ran damp fingers across his throat, as if to convince himself it was yet intact, then shuffled back through the streets of Sebbei muttering under his breath.

Gaethaa led his men at a slow pace along the road, offering only casual attention to the villa they approached, Dron Missa argued with Mollyl over an imaginary dice game, and Jan loudly complained that both men had cheated him of his share of the pot.

They drew closer to the villa. Still there appeared no threatening movement from inside. Yet it seemed impossible that Kane was not watching their approach. Did he suspect?

At about two-hundred yards there sounded a sudden deadly hiss! Bell screamed and fell back on his saddle, reddened fingers clutching at the crossbow bolt that had abruptly sprouted from his left shoulder! His horse reared in alarm at the scent of fear and pain.

So Kane had been waiting! Gaethaa whirled in his saddle to shout an order, and a second bolt screamed through the space he had just turned from! Alarmed at the accuracy and speed of

Kane's marksmanship, Gaethaa again realized there was no cover for them until they could reach the villa.

"Get back!" he bellowed, as his men started to spread apart to ride in low. "Get back out of range! Hurry!"

A third bolt glanced across the back of Alidore's mail as the men wheeled on his command. Alidore cursed and bent low over his horse's neck. Luckily the shaft had struck him as he was turning and merely glanced on past him. Even at this range a direct hit from a powerful crossbow would slice through chain mail such as he wore. A fourth bolt narrowly missed Dron Missa before they galloped beyond range.

Bell held his saddle until they returned to the shelter of a grove of palms. There he slumped to the earth and sat against a palm trunk while Sed tho'Dosso examined the wound.

"Can't be fatal if he call still cuss like that," Missa offered thoughtfully. "A few inches off the heart, but not bad for the range. Why call us back here, milord?"

Gaethaa scowled at the villa in reappraisal. "Don't want to risk any further casualties. Too little cover around the place, damn it! Fast as he was firing, Kane must be working the cocking lever by hand. He'd be sure to get off a few more shots before we reached him, and at the range he hit Bell he must be as good a marksman as they claim! Damn near finished a few others of us anyway—he waited till we were well in his range before attacking! Not worth the risk to rush him now. We'll have darkness shortly. So we'll hit him again when the light's too poor for archery, but still too bright for Kane to slip away—if we watch carefully!"

"That's cutting it close," Alidore commented.

"Don't tell me what I already know!" Gaethaa retorted, "Anmuspi! Think you can get a fire arrow in where it can smoke

him out? If we drive him from the villa, then Kane will be the one caught in the open!"

The archer smiled deliberately, his lined face asymmetrical with the sword scar that flashed white in rare moments of anger. "Roof of that place is timber, of course. I can ride a bit closer and pepper it with as many fire arrows as you want. It's an easy target that size, and I'll still be out of Kane's range. No crossbow can shoot as far as a heavy horn bow—unless you count those stupid-looking contraptions that take five minutes for a strong man to wind to a cock."

"Great? We'll burn him out then!" Gaethaa declared.

So Anmuspi the Archer rode back toward the villa. Dismounting beside a clump of young palms, he kindled a small fire and wrapped the ends of several shafts with resinous material. Lighting these from the fire, Anmuspi stepped into the open to draw his bow. He sank his first arrow into the roof of the villa, and his second shot struck about two feet from the other. They burned dimly, evidently unable to fire the timbers. The third arrow was snuffed out in flight and fell without effect upon the roof.

"Try for a window, Anmuspi!" Alidore called.

The archer nodded and shifted his target. Without apparent effort, he fired two more arrows through one window and embedded another in the wall beside the opening. This time he was rewarded with billows of smoke from within. Dron Missa applauded loudly.

Anmuspi was drawing a seventh arrow then, when a crossbow bolt tore straight through his heart. Released, the last arrow shot into the sky and made a burning arc through the gathering night before it plunged into the lake.

"Damn!" exclaimed Gaethaa in amazement, staring at the

archer's body on the ground. "There died a good man! Chalk up one more point on Kane's tally—he'll make an accounting soon!"

"Looks like he's put the fire out too," observed Alidore glumly after a pause. "See—the smoke has just about cleared away. Bell will live, but he's useless for the moment. That leaves seven of us to deal with Kane now, milord."

"Seven to rush him, it seems," Gaethaa mused. "Still that looks like our best strategy. Once it gets a little darker we'll charge the villa. Spread out and move fast in the bad light—all of us ought to make it to him. One man isn't going to prevail against seven like us. Kane may get a few of us before he's taken, but take him we will!"

Cereb Ak-Cetee had been rubbing his narrow jaw in thought for several minutes. Now he smiled like a school boy with the solution to an examination question and announced brightly, "It may be that Kane will offer us no further resistance milord. I know of one spell that has a fair chance of drawing his fangs and I should have enough time to cast it before the light grows too dim to keep watch!"

"You picked a fine time to remember it, wizard!" Alidore exploded. "What kept you from mentioning this spell earlier!"

"Just remember that you're Gaethaa's lieutenant, Alidore, and leave the science of magic to me!" Cereb snarled. "In simple words for simple minds to grasp, I'll remind you that sorcery has its laws and limitations. As you know, I've made no pact as yet with any patron god—if I had I wouldn't be wasting your sort! 9 my time riding around with

"Without direct demonic aid, I have to resort to the pure science of sorcery. That means in general that I require lengthy and arduous preparations to weave any powerful spell. The fact that I have no bit of hair, piece of nail, any fragment of Kane's

body—not even an item intimate to his person for that matter—to serve as a focus for my magic eliminates most possibilities for any sort of really potent spell. I've never even seen Kane, and we're no more than reasonably certain that he's the man inside the old villa. Add to this the fact that Kane is himself a sorcerer of considerable ability—a man who can probably block most of my spells through his own knowledge. Now then, tell me where that leaves me!" I

"All right! I apologize," conceded Alidore with little grace. "So where does that leave us? What do you have in mind?"

Cereb Ak-Cetee went on with a sneer in his eyes. "I know a fairly simple spell to induce stupor. I can diffuse it to include anyone within the villa, which will seriously weaken its influence. And Kane may bear some counter-charm against such minor sorceries for all I know. In fact, he can probably resist its effects to an extent purely through force of will, granting he's had extensive occult training. But regardless of whether he can resist it or not, unless he's completely protected the spell is going to slow him down considerably, even if it doesn't lay him out altogether. I didn't mention this spell earlier, because I had assumed he would be too great an adept to fall under its influence. Now I'm not so sure—I doubt if he's made any sort of preparations to guard against attack, in fact. Anyway the spell can soon be cast, and if it doesn't work we're no worse off than before."

"Cast your spell, Cereb," Gaethaa ordered eagerly. "If it can silence that crossbow and nothing more, it can drop Kane right into my hands!"

Kane watched the spot where his attackers had taken cover carefully, the closing darkness limiting his vision far less than for another man, "They seem to have given up the fire arrow idea for now. Guess that means a concerted attack before long. Anyway we seem to have all the fires put out."

He caressed the crossbow stock appreciatively. Kane had had it crafted according to his design, and he prized it highly. "There's a good weapon, though I doubt if many men could draw it with nothing more than this lever. Still the thing takes too long to cock and fire—though that fast shot proved its worth once again. Thoem! If I just had that archer's bow, I could pick off every last one of them before they could cross the clearing!"

He addressed Rehhaile. "What are they doing now?"

Rehhaile's face was tight with concern under the soot—she had helped Kane put out the fires—working through the vision his eyes had given the scene. Cautiously she reached out with her mind to link with the attackers. Avoiding the touch of those whose contact so distressed her, she felt for Alidore. At that distance she could appreciate only dimly the sensory impulses his mind emanated.

"It's hard to say, Kane. The one you shot first is still moving. They don't seem to be getting ready to charge just yet. Some are watching us, and the others are watching someone who seems to be working at something on the ground—I can't tell what. Kane—he's the one that scared me worst—the one who knew I was blind! I think he must be a sorcerer from bits of their thoughts. I could never touch that demented mind of his again!"

"A sorcerer! As if a simple attack by a band of professionals wasn't enough!" Kane swore. "I wonder though—I've heard of some madman called Gaethaa the Avenger who travels with a wizard in his band. A savior of the oppressed, they call him. Maybe this is Gaethaa then who's gone to all the trouble to trail me here—he's fanatical enough to pull the stunt from all I hear! Thought he usually kept a small army with him though."

Anxiously he gauged the amount of daylight left. "Suppose there's no chance they'll let it grow dark enough for us to make a break. They'll rush as soon as it's too dark for me to pick them off

in the open. Break through the garden without any problem and be at the door. I'll try to take them one by one in the entrance hall—maybe get a few shots off first. No, they'll expect that and enter in groups from both sides to surround me. Damn! Wish I knew what that wizard or whatever they have can do! Rehhaile, can you maybe try to enter his mind long enough to..."

Rehhaile cried out in terror. "Kane! Something's wrong! I can't stay awake! Kane! I feel like I..." Her frightened voice trailed off. Like a collapsing puppet, she slumped to the floor. Arms pushed out to hold back the lethargy gave way brokenly, dropping her body to the planks with a soft thump. A tremor shook her as she struggled to rise, then her face fell back, unconsciousness preserving a mask of fear.

Kane struggled to keep to his feet! Blackness slashed through his mind, and his limbs were cased in lead! His strength slipping from him, Kane grimly recognized the cold touch of a spell of paralysis! A simple spell, but one for which he was totally unprotected. No time even to work the counterspell that almost any third-rate conjurer could command.

Desperately he fought the spell. It was a weak one, or he too would lie stretched out on the floor. Still he knew he was helpless to fight off an attack unless he could break free. Sweat dripping from his frame, Kane forced wooden muscles to move limbs of stone. There was a chance for him if he could only move outside the spell's range.

He tottered to the stairway, commanding his body to resist the spell with every atom of his will. On the first step he lost balance and slid drunkenly down the entire flight, rolling to a painful stop at the bottom. Setting his teeth in a death head grin, Kane crawled to the rear door. Already he could hear the hoofbeats of his enemies closing in for the kill. Somehow he pushed through the doorway and kicked it closed behind him. The lake offered an avenue of escape—or a death trap if he could not swim. Still it

was his only chance.

Staggering, lurching, crawling, writhing on his belly—frantically Kane forced his body to cross the twilight garden. The sound of riders was closer now, and Kane had no way of knowing whether they had spotted him in the semidarkness. Hunching forward, he gained the bank of the lake at last. Now he could hear them pounding against the front gate. A final few yards remained. Kane rolled weakly down the slope of the bank and slid off into the lake.

He floundered for a moment, trying to reach deeper water. The cool water closed over his body, and the weight of the sword on his back drew him down. Grimly holding his breath, Kane kicked against the bottom in an effort to get farther from shore. If the water were deep enough, he hoped to be able to float. But although Kane was a strong swimmer, he knew his massive bulk permitted him to float with difficulty in the best of circumstances.

His breath was growing short. With a major effort he wrenched his head above the surface to draw a gasping breath. He had progressed a good many yards from shore, he saw with relief, and as yet his attackers were too busy breaking into the villa to search for him in the lake.

The spell seemed to be lifting! Each movement seemed easier now; no longer did blackness seek so ineluctably to overwhelm his consciousness. The water, the distance he had moved from its focus had stolen power from the spell. The wizard must have ceased to send it against the villa now that his fellows were within. Whatever the reasons, Kane felt his strength begin to return to him.

With silent, powerful strokes Kane swam away underwater across the darkened lake. Behind him his baffled enemies were angrily searching through the silent villa and its gardens for their

prey. But it would be too late to act by the time they realized how their quarry had escaped.

VI. Sword of Cold Light

Gaethaa had been furious once it was obvious that Kane had somehow escaped him. A careful search of the villa had turned up no one other than Rehhaile, still unconscious from the wizard's spell. A search of the gardens had disclosed a trail such as a crawling man might make that led into the lake. Reconstructing Kane's probable actions, Gaethaa had ordered his men to circle the lake shore. But by this time darkness had settled, and it was a hopeless task to search along the overgrown shoreline. Of Kane there was no sign.

In baffled disgust they finally returned to Jethrann's tavern in Sebbei. Rehhaile they bound and brought with them, for Gaethaa had hopes of learning something of value from her.

"Maybe he drowned," Dron Missa offered. "If Cereb's spell was so efficacious, he shouldn't have been able to swim. But then he shouldn't have been able to crawl off either."

"Don't make any bets on it," Gaethaa growled. The Avenger frowned and tugged at his mustache in frustration. "Missa! Damn it all—stop the racket! I'm trying to think!"

Dron Missa started and laid aside his dirk. He had been nervously tapping the born handle against the table.

"What now?" Jan wanted to know.

"Good question," Gaethaa cursed. "We do nothing now—nothing we can do until morning! By then Kane will be half way across Demornte, no doubt! And for the moment we can't stop him. All we can do is patch up Bell and try to pick up Kane's trail when it gets light.

"Well, what's the story with this girl we captured?" he asked, as Alidore took a seat beside him.

"Got kind of a crazy story on her, but they all say about the same," Alidore explained. "Her name's Rehhaile, and she's the one Gavein mentioned earlier as spending a lot of time with Kane. Seems she's his mistress, although I gather she's pretty much anybody's who wants her. Lived in Sebbei all her life—family died in the plague—and makes a living anyway she can. Seemed fascinated with Kane when he showed up, so she's been living with him mostly since then.

"The townspeople consider her to be a sort of witch. They say she's been blind since birth—and that bears out—but she seems to have some type of second sight. It's claimed she can look into your mind and see through your eyes so to speak. They say she can read your thought—scan tell exactly what your feelings are and what you're thinking. I tried her and the story seems to be true."

Gaethaa nodded solemnly. "A witch with psychic powers. Cereb has been telling me of such—he noticed her from the first. Just the sort of creature to be in league with Kane! Obviously she sensed our intentions when we met her on the street and ran off to warn Kane while we were wasting time here with Gavein. Damn the luck!"

"What are you going to do with her?" Jan persisted.

"I'll decide what to do with her tomorrow. She may be of some

use to us yet, so we'll hold her for now. As an accomplice of that devil, she deserves death."

"No objections to our having some fun then?" murmured Mollyl, winking at Jan.

"She cost us our quarry," Gaethaa said coldly. "But don't you guys tough her up so she won't be of use to me later. Doesn't look like she knows anything important about Kane, but maybe there'll be something."

"Even if we must execute her," Alidore protested, "is it right for the men to rape her? This seems like pointless torture."

"Can't rape a whore, Alidore!" laughed Dron Missa, joining the other men in a squabble over seniority.

After the others moved away, Alidore remained at the table beside Gaethaa, a frown still troubling his tanned face. His wine cup stood before him untasted. An occasional twitch flickered along the square line of his jaw, as if there were words that must be uttered, but that he kept to himself.

Gaethaa noticed his lieutenant's mood and turned to him in concern. The Kamathaen lord prized Alidore's comradeship highly. He had admired the Lartroxian youth's tough courage and intelligent zeal when Alidore had first joined his band nearly two years ago. Alidore had been in his late teens then, and Gaethaa, about a dozen years his senior, had grown to consider him a younger brother. He knew he could count on Alidore to stand beside him in any battle and he relied on his counsel in deciding many points of strategy. While most of his followers over the years rode behind his banner for gold, adventure, revenge or other personal motivations, Gaethaa recognized that Alidore more than any of the others was drawn by the same idealism he felt. His present mood puzzled Gaethaa.

"All right, Alidore," he said quietly. "What is it? Something has

been gnawing away at you for a good while now. I've watched it building up inside you bit by bit. Out with it—what's bothering you? You know you don't need to hold it back from me if you don't feel right about the way something is going."

Alidore bit his lip and raised his wine cup, not yet meeting Gaethaa's eyes. "It's nothing worth... It's vague..." he began uneasily. "Just something that's been getting to me more and more as it keeps showing up. I don't know, maybe I'm getting battle fatigue after too many campaigns. I just notice it more. Nothing definite I like to bring up, but..."

Gaethaa watched him anxiously, knowing that in time his lieutenant would speak his mind. This much reticence was out of character for him.

"It's this girl Rehhaile..."

"Rehhaile?" Gaethaa's hawk-like face twisted in surprise. "Rehhaile? What's there about the witch that bothers you?"

"Well, it's not just her, it's a lot of things that keep hanging in my mind. She's an example is all," Alidore continued. "The mutiny we had at the border of Demornte. The execution of the prisoners when we destroyed the Red Three. The way we took the town apart last year in Burwhet when we took on Olidi and his gang of raiders. Those men you let Mollyl torture to tell us where Recom Launt would attack next. The hostages you let him butcher when you refused to lift the seige of his fortress..."

"The alternative was to withdraw—to turn tail and let that murderous robber baron regain his stranglehold on the trade routes. And I had to know when and where to strike for that first battle with him. The lives of his henchmen and of some hostages were unimportant weighed against the greater good I accomplished there by destroying Launt and permitting thousands to cross his domain in peace. Perhaps the men were a

bit out of hand in Burwhet, but regardless of the destruction we caused there, Olidi and every last one of his cutthroats died in the fighting. Burwhet could rebuild and prosper with that gang of renegade bandits finally scoured from the land. Those weren't prisoners we executed—they were accomplices of the Red Three and tainted with the ogres' inhuman crimes. As for the men who turned traitor to me in the shadow of Demornte, any man who's ever carried a sword in his lord's army knows that mutiny is punishable by death. No leader could ever command respect and discipline of his men if he ignored blatant desertion. We've been through this before, Alidore.

"This sorceress Rehhaile—in view of her youth and ignorance I could have overlooked her living with Kane. But she deliberately gave him warning of our presence here, and for that crime she must pay the price. If we had taken Kane by complete surprise—as it seems likely now we would have—our mission here would be completed. Anmuspi might well be alive still, although it's foolish to think we could have taken Kane without some casualties. Foolish to speculate over what should have happened anyway."

A woman's moan of pain broke from the upstairs of the tavern, accompanied by thick laughter.

Alidore winced. "Why not give her a clean death then? Why torture her like this?"

"She's a wanton—you told me as much yourself." Gaethaa shrugged. "She's not getting anything such a woman isn't used to. Besides the men need a break—they've ridden long and hard without any sport. Let them have their fun—I'll deal with Rehhaile tomorrow maybe."

Alidore still seemed troubled. "It's all logical when you explain it. I'm not implying we've ever stooped to senseless brutality, of course. I don't know, maybe my backbone's getting soft. It seems

like there could be a little room for mercy..."

Drawing a hand across his high forehead to push back the blond locks that drifted down, Gaethaa drew a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. His blue-gray eyes grew bitter in memory. "Sure, mercy. Remember the time years ago when Reanist talked me into sparing that girl we found chained in the sorcerer's tower? The people of the region protested, but Reanist had an eye for beauty and insisted she was only a prisoner. That night her kisses killed Reanist and five other good men before my sword ended her inhuman thirst, and even Cereb Ak-Cetee wasn't certain what manner of demon we had harbored. Or earlier when we spared Tirli-Selan's family, then had to return later and fight a far more costly battle when we learned that they were bloodier despots than their uncle.

"Alidore, it doesn't work out like you'd hope for it to. I've let too many men die from blood poisoning still begging my surgeon not to amputate all of a gangrenous limb. Poison spreads. A tiny cancer will ultimately corrupt and destroy the strongest organism. Let a fragment of evil evade your exorcism, and it will inevitably flourish to cause even more death and suffering to humanity. False mercy is worse than ill-advised in my struggle against the forces of evil. Its consequences can completely pervert and destroy all the goals for which I fight."

Gaethaa's face grew pale with emotion. His eyes glowed with vision, and sweat glistened over his forehead. A tremor passed through his clenched hands, as his voice shook with intensity.

"I am called Gaethaa the Crusader, and the name is one I hope to be worthy of always. I have made my life a crusade against evil, and it is a crusade that will end only when the last spark of life fails me. When I was a child I listened to the great sagas told by my father's soldiers around the fires—and I listened to the darker tales they whispered of the strange lands where forces of evil held power over all who dwelt therein. Even then I vowed to

myself that when I became a man I would not waste my life among the perfumed sycophants of Kamathaen nobility. I turned my back on indolent court life, and chose instead a life of riding against the cold wind with a war cry on my lips and a sword raised in my hand. I worked from childhood to prepare myself for this life. For tutors I drew upon the best tacticians available to teach me military strategy; my training at arms was at the hands of masters of their chosen weapon. I learned to read and converse in a dozen languages, and the wisest scholars of our age instructed me in logic and philosophy—for I knew it was not sufficient that I learn to wield a sword untempted by reason, nor allow other men to be my ears and tongue.

"Alidore, I have seen the cold light of good! The cold light shed by truth, righteousness justice. The cold light that dispels the darkness of evil! The universe is structured on these two forces—the power of good shining as a beacon of cold, clear light against the smothering blackness of evil! And as surely as sunlight drives away the night, the cold light of good annihilates the darkness of evil!

"And I have vowed to serve the cold light! To destroy with a sword of cold light the shadow of evil that darkens our world! Darkness is vanquished by fight, and the forces of evil fall before the powers of good! But in the battle of light against darkness there can be no intermediate shades—no twilight powers! Those who do not follow the cold light are children of darkness, and they must and shall be destroyed by the cold, clear fight of good!

"And if my crusade at times strikes you as without mercy, it is because there can be no mercy, no uncertainty in this struggle! The cold light shall burn away the darkness of evil, even if a thousand must die to drive back the shadows! Their suffering is a petty price to pay for the ultimate victory!"

Totally swept up in the spell of Gaethaa's exhortation, Alidore listened with mind awl—uncertain at times whether he served

a saint or madman.

Gaethaa had been silent for several minutes before Alidore broke from his near trance. "I'm sorry to have sounded unworthy of the confidence you place in me, milord," he spoke dazedly, not certain how the Crusader had interpreted his misgivings.

A quiet smile crossed Gaethaa's face, and he rose to brush his fist against his lieutenant's shoulder. "Why are you apologizing, Alidore? Your concern is understandable, and mercy is an invaluable principle when it is called for. Your feelings are misplaced, that's all, and I hope I've done a little toward clearing away the confusion in your mind. You need to remember that we're only a badly outnumbered few aligned in a cosmic struggle between diametrically opposed forces. Softness in this struggle isn't mercy, but unforgivable stupidity.

"Look, it's getting late, and we'll be up and after Kane as soon as there's daylight outside. I'm going to get some sleep now, and why don't you turn in yourself. You're exhausted now, and a lot of things will be clearer to you in the morning."

Alidore watched his leader depart. Things were a lot clearer after listening to Gaethaa, he realized. Still he did not feel like turning in. A strange restlessness still haunted him, and he sat up mulling over his thoughts and slowly sipping his wine. Sleep did not come, perhaps because every time his eyes started to close he caught the sound of choked cries from the room above.

At length when the others lost interest, Alidore went to Rehhaile also.

It was near dawn when Alidore left Rehhaile and started to pull shirt and trousers over his lean body. She was not asleep, but turned toward him on the bed, her uncanny blind eyes red from tears. There were many sullen purple bruises marring her tan skin, and her back was crossed with livid welts. Compared with

other women whom Molly had amused himself with, she hadn't been badly messed up, Alidore thought.

She looked so forlorn there on the rumpled bed, and Alidore felt remorse for what they had done to her. She hadn't been like a whore at all—there had been no hardness, no professionalism. In a way it had made him feel like he had raped one who loved him, and Alidore couldn't shake the awful feeling of betrayal.

Rehhaile ran a tongue, over swollen lips, sensing his guilt. "Don't feel too bad. You were kinder than the others at least." Alidore muttered something and offered her a cup of wine. "What is to happen to me now?" she asked, and he felt uncomfortable and told her noncommittally that this was for Gaethaa to decide. Weakly she sat up and touched her bruised abdomen tenderly, a whimper hovering on her lips. "Why are you doing this to me?"

Alidore looked away. He could tell her that she deserved no better because she had chosen to align herself with evil, but somehow the words seemed unreal now. "You did a foolish thing when you helped Kane escape. In doing so you have thwarted the cause of justice, and punishment must be carried out."

"Was raping me an act of justice? Do you think I deserve what is being done to me?" Rehhaile responded illogically.

Alidore was fumbling for a reply, when a shriek echoed from the stables!

VII. A Wounded Tiger

Kane had not fled Sebbei.

Regaining his strength, he had crossed the small lake in the darkness. Reaching the inner wall of the city, Kane had lain hidden among the tall reeds while Gaethaa and his men floundered about in a futile search for him. Silently he had watched from the shadows as Gaethaa returned to Sebbei. With noiseless step he had followed his enemies back to Jethrann's tavern.

Like a phantom he had stalked them through the ghostly streets of Sebbei, and in his killer's eyes there gleamed the cold fires of death. For Kane had no thought of fleeing from his pursuers. Their attack had made a fool of him—nearly succeeding because of the apathy into which he had drifted. Now only blood would shake the fury that drove him after those who hunted him.

Crouched in the darkness outside the tavern, Kane watched and listened, striving to learn more of his assailants. Among them Sed tho'Dosso was the only man he recognized. But once he heard spoken the name Gaethaa, Kane understood the reason for the attack.

Gaethaa the Avenger—so the Kamathaen lord had at last determined to include Kane in his crusade. Kane worked to recall all the scraps of information he had come across concerning Gaethaa. The prospect was not pleasing. Gaethaa was a

dangerous opponent—a man of tenacious courage who was reputedly a deadly warrior as well as brilliant strategist. His mercenaries were one of the best private armies in the civilized world, it was said. From their numbers they must have had a few setbacks in finding him though, Kane mused.

Eight men—all professional fighters—plus the unknown factor represented in the wizard. The wizard would be that young Tranodeli he had heard a little about—one of the Cetee clan whose talents had run toward sorcery. And he was supposed to be as brilliant a mind to study the black arts since the strange fall of Carsultyal. The odds were clearly too great for direct attack. The game would have to be played by more subtle rules.

And so Kane waited in the darkness, waited for a chance to kill, and to his ears there came at times a girl's cry of pain.

Toward the approach of dawn Kane crept into the shelter of the tavern stable. He had hoped for a chance to attack Gaethaa's band while they slept, but several of the men had been up throughout the night—not so much standing guard as raising hell. Abandoning the idea, Kane stealthily climbed into the darkened loft to wait for events to unfold. Evidently Gaethaa's confidence in his own power was sufficient that he assumed Kane would spend the night hours in full flight. Lurking in his very shadow was as safe a position as any. Besides the night was cold, and Kane was still damp and caked with mud from the lake. Shivering from the chill, he helped himself to a pile of horse blankets and snuggled into the straw of the loft. There were fleas crawling through the blankets, but they were warm.

In the last quiet moments before dawn his vigilance was rewarded. A man now stumbled through the door—tho'Dosso, Kane recognized with grim delight. The desert bandit had been awake most of the night, and now he sleepily cursed Gaethaa for sending him to look after the horses. With groggy movements he passed from stall to stall, checking to see that each mount had all

the grain and water it required. Completing his rounds, Sed rested his lantern on a barrel and sullenly contemplated the pile of saddles and equipment that would have to be harnessed to the horses before long. There was time enough for a nap, he decided. With a groan he sank down against a stall and closed his eyes.

Kane watched the Lomarni bandit chieftain intently. Here was an excellent chance to rid himself of one of his enemies, but there were a few problems. Kane still carried his sword and dagger, but neither weapon was useful at the moment. With Sed tho'Dosso below him, he would have to descend the loft ladder to reach him—and that meant too much noise to hope to take the other unawares. In his huddled position, the bandit presented a difficult target for a dagger throw. There was no chance for a quick, clean kill, and Kane knew he would have to strike silently. At the first shout of danger, Gaethaa's men would come swarming over the stable, and Kane would again be trapped.

Slowly Kane slipped free of the blankets. A coil of rope lay at hand in the loft, suggesting a possibility. Cautiously he crawled across the loft, watching the sleeping bandit for the first sign of alarm. The loft was laid with thick beams, and they held his weight without creaking. Still the boards were widely spaced, and a thin trickle of dust and straw sifted down from the loft as he passed. The stream was not noticeable in the darkness, but as it drifted closer to Sed tho'Dosso, there was danger that he might feel the dust brushing his face.

The desert man snored softly. Gingerly Kane rose to his feet and reached for the rope. The sky was starting to gray, but the loft was still hidden in shadow. At any moment another of the Crusader's men might enter the stable to help Sed with the horses, and Kane knew his time was running out. A chance entrance, a flash of lantern light, and he would be silhouetted against the rafters.

Quickly he worked one end of the rope into a sliding noose.

Playing the hemp through his hands, he coiled it into a throwing lariat that he felt he could count on. Poising himself on the open edge of the loft, Kane looked down at the sleeping bandit. Grimly he readied the noose in his hands.

"Sed! Sed tho'Dosso!" he called softly. "Wake up, Sed!"

With a guilty start the Lomarni roused himself. Still groggy, he raised his head and looked about him stupidly. "Huh?"

Kane cast his lariat the instant Sed lifted his head. Perfectly aimed the noose dropped over the bandit's head, and with a jerk Kane snugged it tight against his neck. Sed had time for one thin shriek as terror slashed through the curtain of sleep, then the biting noose cut off his breath! Even as his frenzied fingers tore at the choking coil, the Lomarni was violently yanked from the stable floor and swung into the air!

Kane swore in anger, the muscles bunched along his shoulders and back as he hauled the bandit free of the earth. His cast had been on target, but he had meant to draw tight the noose before his startled victim could cry out. Now a warning had been sounded. Helplessly twisting like a fly in a spider's web, the wiry desert man kicked and contorted in Kane's grasp.

Holding the writhing bandit chieftain suspended with one hand, Kane hurriedly tossed the free end of the rope over a rafter. Then he seized the loose end and leapt from the loft. Sed tho'Dosso jerked and shot relentlessly toward the roof, as Kane's greater weight bore his end downward to the floor. Lightly he landed and knotted the rope over a stall. The entire episode had taken seconds.

Eyes bulging horribly, Sed tho'Dosso watched his laughing enemy wave a derisive farewell as he stepped through the rear door to vanish into the dawn.

Seconds later Gaethaa and his men pounded into the stable.

They glared about without comprehension until Jan pointed his hook upward, and then they cut him down. But the Lomarni's neck was broken, and even as his lips formed the name "Kane," his body shuddered in death.

"Kane!" shouted Gaethaa in exultation. "Then he came back! By Thoem! I was a fool to think that he would flee us! Like a wounded tiger, he's turned on his hunters! Well, he's the fool this time, because now we don't have to ride off after his trail! We have him trapped!

"How about it Cereb—can you flush him out for me?"

The wizard tossed his bony shoulders beneath his cloak. "Just watch," he replied lazily.

Shortly thereafter Kane was not overly surprised to see the walls of Sebbei suddenly burst into blue flame. From his vantage point on the flat roof of an empty house, he watched the fires blaze with undiminished heat, despite the fact that they were fed by nothing visible, and that within them the wall stood undisturbed. But anything living would be instantly consumed he knew, for he recognized the spell.

He drew back his lips in a savage grin. Yes, it was a powerful spell, one which he had no hope of breaking in his present position. He was trapped in Sebbei. But then, he had no intention of fleeing the city until the game was played out. Gaethaa probably sensed this now, so perhaps he and his pet wizard had something in mind that might shake his resolve.

Something had to be done about the sorcerer, and Kane searched through his fantastic stores of black knowledge for something that he could use to retaliate. Finally in utter frustration he realized that his opponent was certain to be protected against any spell available to him under present circumstances. Gaethaa would keep his wizard well guarded from

physical danger as well. An arrow might do it, and Kane again regretted the loss of his crossbow. So far the only serviceable long range weapon he had found in the deserted buildings was a thick spear—designed only for stabbing and short casts.

Disgusted, Kane slipped away to see why his enemies had not yet followed.

In the square before the tavern he found them. Fascinated Gaethaa and his men observed while Cereb Ak-Cetee performed a long incantation over an intricately designed pentagram. Abruptly the incense-choked air within the pentacle wavered, and then within the smoke crouched a demon with checkered, reptilian scales—summoned from some unguessable plane.

Pleased with the success of his invocation, Cereb's flushed face broke into a boyish grin. Trapped within the pentagram the demon glowered back wrathfully and champed its reeking fangs. Suddenly its hunched shoulders heaved and the demon's crusted talons ripped out for the wizard—only to strike crimson sparks as they encountered the magic barrier! Cereb Ak-Cetee chuckled at the monster's howl of agonized rage. "Fight all you want to, slave! The pentagram will hold you fast until I grant you release! And that I won't do until you first swear to perform a service for me!"

The demon spat out a mockery of human speech. "You have summoned the wrong servant then! In my sphere I hold only very minor powers. Release me now, and summon one greater than I to do your bidding!"

"Modest, aren't you now. No—I'm not about to call any of your brothers! A bigger fish might prove too strong for my net to hold. You can do what I require of you well enough though. We have a man who hides from us here, and I command you to bring him to us. He's trapped here—I've enclosed the town within a ring of fire. And my spell will make it possible for you to move

within the ring of fire, despite the disparity of your universe and this one. All you need do is ferret him out, and to help you we've procured this..."

"Watch out!" shouted Jan. "It's Kane! Making a rush!"

They all whirled at the shout to see Kane dashing toward them with spear poised!

"Cover Cereb!" Gaethaa ordered. "We've got..."

And Kane hurled the spear! Wobbling, the clumsy missile curved across the square—easily dodged even in the short space. But Kane had not thrown at the sorcerer, nor at any of the men; such an effort would have been wasted at this range. Instead he cast the spear for the pentagram!

The iron spearpoint skittered upon the packed ground and ripped into the earth, cutting through the border of the pentagram!

The demon howled in unearthly laughter as it catapulted from its shattered prison! Cereb Ak-Cetee uttered one great scream of inexpressible horror as the vengeful creature swept him up in its awful embrace! "Now who commands his slave!" roared the demon in triumph.

Shuddering roar as the cosmic portal swung open, then shut—cutting off hopeless shriek and mocking laughter in mid-peal! Then only a trading puff of sulfurous mist marked the spot where wizard and demon had disappeared.

Nor—when they at last broke from their shock to look—was there any sign of Kane.

VIII. To Destroy the Servant of Evil

Glumly Gaethaa considered the fate of his wizard. So now it was just the six of them against Kane.

"The flame barrier has fallen, milord," Alidore observed. The spell had broken with the wizard's death.

Gaethaa pensively scratched his long jaw. "Doesn't matter. Pretty obvious by now that Kane means to finish the chase right here. Looks like Kane has lived up to his legend—easily the most deadly and resourceful agent of evil I've set out to destroy." There was grim satisfaction in his face.

He turned for the tavern, and his men followed willingly. Dron Missa rummaged around frantically for an unopened flask of wine among the wreckage of last night; a delighted cry marked his success.

"Question is, how do we find him in all this maze," continued Gaethaa. "Damn it! Quit fighting over that wine and let me think! Jan—tell that spineless host of ours to bring up some more on the double! After what we've just seen, a drink is damn well called for!" He frowned and pulled at his mustache in thought.

Mollyl glanced towards Rehhaile, who slumped bound against a pillar. "Kane seemed hot for the bitch there. Maybe if we took her outside and started to tickle her a bit, Kane would make a rush to get her. If she can't tell us anything, she'd still be good bait."

Gaethaa considered the suggestion carefully, staring blankly at Rehhaile, mindless of the girl's terror. "Could be," he concluded.

A sick feeling was growing in Alidore's stomach. Witch, whore, whatever her crimes might be—it was too much to turn this girl over to Mollyl's twisted amusements. "Milord," he said hastily, "it seems altogether unlikely to me that a demon like Kane would give a second thought to the sufferings of another person regardless of the fact she saved his life with her warning. Mollyl's suggestion would only give Kane valuable time either to escape or hatch further schemes."

Gaethaa nodded at his logic, and Alidore felt unreasonably relieved. And in noting the expression of gratitude flashed him by Rehhaile, he missed the glare of hatred on Mollyl's face.

"Nothing for it but a house to house search," concluded Gaethaa. He rose to his feet. "Only six of us. That means we'll need the help of the townspeople."

"Gavein! I want you to call together all available men who can carry a weapon! We'll initiate a systematic sweep of the town until we can uncover that devil!"

His face was tired beyond human endurance, but his rusty voice rasped in weary determination. "Please, milord. I have already told you that we of Sebbei will have nothing to do with your fight with this Kane. We wish only..."

"I know—only to sit around and slowly die. Thoem! You people take longer to die than anyone has a right to! Well, you can go on with your merry little moldering lives as soon as we finish with Kane! Until then I'll demand that your people give me full co-operation!"

Gavein set his stubbled jaw. "Demand all you want then. But no one in Sebbei will bother to obey your ranting!"

Gaethaa uttered a curse of baffled anger, "Mollyl! You and Jan talk to this fool outside where they can all see we mean business! If I have to bully them into helping us look for Kane I will! It's plain this bunch of gutless slugs won't lift a hand against us!"

With a thin smile Mollyl grabbed the scrawny mayor, while Jan painstakingly rescrewed the hook to the stump of his wrist. "Gaethaa—you can't be going to torture this man because he refuses to help us!" Alidore protested.

The Crusader's face was grave. "Regrettable I know, Alidore. But desperate measures are called for. I am prepared to sacrifice any number of lives to destroy this madman Kane—because in the end many more lives will be spared from his monstrous schemes! Anyway, in refusing to help, Gavein and his people are giving direct aid to the cause of evil! They've brought this all upon themselves!" He stalked resolutely from the room.

"Stay here with the bitch if you're squeamish," suggested Mollyl with a smile. "Jan, you and Bell give me a hand. Go call the people together, Missa."

Alidore frowned irritably and started to follow, but Rehhaile called his name. So he stopped, mind in indecisive turmoil, and hesitantly approached their captive. From the square outside came a howl of agony and an inspired laugh.

"Is that what's going to happen to me?" she asked him.

He felt a sharp nausea of unreasonable guilt. "I'll see that you'll feel no pain," he declared, then cursed his callousness as he saw her frightened tears. Damn! He had no business permitting personal feelings to intrude on a clear-cut matter like this. What difference did the fate of this devil's whore make to him? She mattered nothing weighed against the rightfulness of their mission. Uneasily Alidore realized that despite her guilt, her own fate meant a great deal to Rehhaile.

He drew his knife. "Look. You don't really belong in this mess. Your crimes aren't that important to us." He mumbled on clumsily, unable to say anything that did not sound foolish in his own ears, still unable to shut up. The knife sliced her bonds as he talked.

Unsteadily she rose to her feet. "You're letting me go," she said needlessly.

Alidore gave a tight lipped nod. "I can slip you through the rear door—I can see everyone else is out front." She shuddered, her face frightened and pale. Alidore thought of her uncanny second sight and realized she could sense every detail of the beating going on outside.

"Get away from them!" she whispered fiercely. "You don't belong with them! In your soul there is still some human feeling! All but burned out!"

"What do you mean!" Alidore protested. "These men are my fellow soldiers on a mission of good! We may be forced to resort to savage methods, but our goal is to help mankind! I'd die for Gaethaa willingly! He's the greatest man of this age!"

She laughed then—or maybe it was a sob. Alidore could not be certain. Her sightless face held him as she spat back in scornful pity. "Do you call me blind, Alidore! Gaethaa a great man! A Crusader battling the forces of evil! While Kane has lived here he has harmed no one. Since you came yesterday, your great man and your fellow soldiers have terrorized the town, raped me and threatened worse, demolished this tavern, bullied Gavein—and now you're beating him to death to force the people of Sebbei to obey commands meaningless to them!"

Alidore protested hotly. "But it's for the good of all! The man we're after is one of the most villainous..."

"Are you so much better then? Is Gaethaa a saint who has

brought all this upon us? Are men like Mollyl, Jan, Bell and the others heroes? Perverted killers! Animals! Mercenaries who kill for profit and pleasure!

"Alidore! Please leave them now!"

"Get out of here! Right now!" he snarled. "I'll not desert Gaethaa!" His mind a whirl of confusion, he buried his head in his arms upon the table. Her steps moved away hurriedly, but he no longer listened.

A thousand years passed before Gaethaa called him, and he dazedly went outside. "Well, the old fool's dead!" the Crusader snapped in annoyance. "Completely useless too. These walking dead men only ran off when we tried to show them a lesson! Locked in their houses! They'll all die in their shadows before breaking out of their apathy! Never mind though! Their cowardice makes them worthless to us. We'll find Kane ourselves one way or another!"

Hoping that Rehhaile would have time to reach some place of safety before the others noticed her absence, Alidore joined Gaethaa in the square. The twisted body of Gavein lay sprawled in the dust, a patch of dampness growing in the late morning sunlight. His veins should have contained only dust, Alidore mused, avoiding the ruined face that tilted upward toward the sky. Jan caught his eye and grinned, fastidiously polishing his hook across his thigh.

"Shall I bring out the girl?" Mollyl smiled, his pale face a tight mask. "Anything's worth trying now."

Gaethaa shrugged. "Might as well. We'll stake her out in the sun and leave her. It might draw Kane's attention and keep him close by, even if he won't risk getting to her,"

Alidore casually watched as Mollyl and Bell entered the tavern. No longer did he have second thoughts on his decision to

release her. He almost smiled at the angry shout from within, as Mollyl discovered her escape.

"Hey, she's gone!" Mollyl bellowed from the doorway. "Her bonds were cut! Damn you, Alidore! You turned the witch loose!"

Bristling in defense of himself, Alidore snarled back "The hell I did! She was tied tip when I left her a minute ago! One of the townspeople must have done it! Maybe Kane came back! Hell, there's broken glass all over the tavern—she might have cut herself free while you were playing with Gavein!"

"All right! Let it pass! She's gone!" Gaethaa shouted to halt the dispute. He looked at his lieutenant narrowly, but decided it was not worth an inquest. Maybe Alidore would be less moody now.

"She wasn't of any real use to us anyway," he continued. "If she's with Kane now, that's fine for us. She'll only hinder his movements, and the two should be ten times easier to find than Kane alone.

"We'll divide our forces and start searching from house to house. That will make it three to one when we find Kane, and I'd rather the odds were greater after what we've learned of him. Still it's the best we can do. If we stuck together, we'd only chase around in circles through this ghost town. And if we spread out any more he might pick us off one by one. So don't underestimate our quarry. Remember he has untold centuries of cunning to direct his every move. When you find him don't give him a chance. Call for the rest of us when you get close to him, and be ready for anything.

"Ok then. Mollyl and Jan come with me—we'll start to the west from the square. Alidore, you take Missa and Bell and search east. Good hunting!"

Dron Missa critically eyed Bell, whose left shoulder was

wrapped in thick bandages. "Too bad you can't trade that sling for a hook like Jan's," he commented. "Then you'd maybe be worth something in a fight."

Bell's coarse face grew scarlet in anger. "Anytime you want to find out, kid! Anytime—you don't even need to ask! I'll push in your smirking little face just as sure with my right arm as with both! Want to try it right now?"

"All right! Save it for Kane when we find him!" Alidore ordered.

Eyes alert for the first sign of danger, the hunters strode across the square and into the silent streets. Somewhere in this city of ghosts lurked the man they had come to destroy. This mission that had already cost so much hardship and death must soon be completed.

"By the way, Alidore," Dron Missa whispered as they moved away. "That was a good move with Rehhaile."

Alidore looked at the Waldann curiously, then answered his grin.

IX. Death in the Shadows

Kane edged along the rooftop cautiously, keeping in view the three men who walked through the street below. The morning had faded into afternoon, and now the shadows again were stretching out across the empty streets. Soon they would reach all

the way across, then the shadows would soften and begin to creep over the entire city. And darkness would return to Sebbei.

Kane was waiting for the night. Throughout the day he had assiduously avoided his pursuers, moving always just a little ahead of their search. This way he could keep them in view at all times, and thereby preclude a chance confrontation. He had considerable confidence in his own prowess, but he recognized that his opponents were hardened fighters as well. At present it seemed pointless to meet his enemies on their own terms. Three of them might well hold him at bay long enough for the others to arrive. Kane did not care to be caught in a trap again.

So he waited for darkness to come. Night would be to his advantage, and in the interim Gaethaa and his men could grow exhausted and careless.

The roof was hot. Exposed on the glossy slate surface, Kane was reminded most emphatically that it was a desert sun shining down over Demornte. The tiles stung his bare flesh as he crept over them—slabs of green—and gray-hued black, whose relative darkness Kane could judge from the heat that met his touch. Sweat trickled across his body, leaving damp patches wherever he rested, making his hands slip against the slate as he climbed the sloping roof.

It was easier to steal through the streets, keeping to the alleys and slipping through the empty buildings. The few townspeople that Kane encountered slunk away from him with faces averted, all but squeezing shut their eyes to avoid any contact with him. So did they creep away from his pursuers, Kane had observed, scuttling for their burrows when the strangers demanded information of them. They would not betray him, Kane felt assured. They only stood wretchedly by while his hunters searched suspiciously through their shops and houses, or pointed blindly when impatient threats demanded an indication of Kane's hiding place. At length Gaethaa's men too dismissed the

townspeople as participants or even witnesses in this hunt.

But Kane made it a point to leave the maze of narrow streets and empty buildings at frequent intervals. Their cover masked his enemies' movements as well as his own, and such apparent sanctuary could too easily become a cul-de-sac. Climbing along the rooftops he could follow their progress and alter his own course as their movements dictated.

A rustling scrape alerted him, and he spun about with knife poised. It was a long, gray lizard, crawling across the tiles away from him. The reptile halted, settled against the sun steeped states, and regarded the human with a glassy, inscrutable stare. Kane licked his dry lips, tasting salt, and wiped his sticky face with a grimy arm. His sword belt chafed his back, and sweat dripped across his chest to soak the harness. He had rolled the sleeves and opened the front of his shirt, but his leather vest and pants offset any help this afforded toward cooling him off. With darkness the air would soon grow chill again.

The inner wall of Sebbei was growing close again, so the search had now completed half of its second circuit—once already Gaethaa's men had worked their way from the square to the wall and back again, and now they had returned to the wall a second time. Tempers were as burning hot as the slate tiles he rested upon, and Kane caught shreds of argument that he probably had left the old city altogether. Vigilance had relaxed as frustration piled up, and Kane decided it was an opportune point for him to strike.

Kane had always been careful to stay well ahead of his pursuers while he climbed across the rooftops. His boots made a soft scuffling upon the slates no matter how gingerly he moved about. In each group of searchers, one man always held an arrow ready to draw, and no building was entered until they made a close scrutiny for evidence of their quarry lurking somewhere above them. Now as he saw them approaching the empty

apartment house on whose roof he lay hidden, Kane held his position.

Huddled against the stone cornice, he watched through a chink in the blocks as the three halted before the structure and looked it over. Alidore stood back with an arrow nocked and ready, his eyes scanning the building front for any sign of danger. Swords drawn, Dron Missa and Bell entered the tenement ahead of him. Once they called out to him, Alidore hurriedly stepped inside as well.

His ear pressed to the roof, Kane could bear an occasional faint crash from within, as they carried out the tedious business of examining each room of the crumbling apartment. There was no access to the roof from within, so Kane knew they could not reach him at the moment. This particular tenement had obviously been in disrepair even before the plague, and the intervening years were not far short of bringing it to total ruin. Earlier in the day Kane had almost lost his balance when a cornice stone had shifted beneath his weight, and the decrepit state of the entire building front had suggested a possibility.

Now while his enemies searched through the rotting apartments, Kane busily attacked the cornice with his knife. The dagger point dug into the crumbling mortar as if it were mud. A growing pile of grit and dirt spread about his knees as he worked, hoping that the soft grating of metal on stone would not be heard below.

The sound of voices reached the street again, and Kane sheathed his blade quickly. Rising to his feet he tried to peer through the cracks to see when the men would step out into the street. Luck was still with him—they had not attempted the rotted stairs leading from the tenement's rear exit. But his vision was limited by the position, so the best he could do would be to estimate by the sound of their voices the approximate moment they would walk beneath the cornice.

It was time to take the risk. If his timing were off this might prove catastrophic. His feet set against the slates, Kane braced his shoulder against the cornice and slowly heaved, hoping that the entire building front would not collapse as well. The cornice resisted his pressure at first, so he threw against it the full strength of his massive frame. With a sudden treacherous release of tension, the stone facade buckled outward and collapsed! Thrown off balance, Kane waved his arms wildly and tottered on the brink, about to topple after the plummeting stonework!

The three were just emerging from the doorway in chagrin, when Dron Missa felt a trickle of grit sift past his face. "Look out!" he howled, his fighter's reflexes reacting faster than thought to the cold breath of death he sensed. With the blinding agility of an acrobat, Missa sprang into the street and rolled in a somersault across to the opposite side! Still in the doorway, Alidore leapt back into the hallway at the Waldann's cry of warning!

Bell's dull mind was slower to react. Not comprehending the cause for Missa's shout, he wasted a scant second to glare upward. His eyes had barely time to register the terror that started within him as Bell saw the wall of rock hurtling down upon him! His scream had scarcely reached his lips before it was swallowed in the thunderous shock of the facade slamming against the street!

Alidore glanced in horror at the scarlet splotted heap of rubble strewn before the doorway. Only the barest fragment of time had separated him from such a death.

"There he is!" shouted Missa, recovering from the shock in time to see Kane regain his balance and dart back from the roof's edge. "Quick, Alidore! Bring the bow! Kane's on the roof!"

Scrambling over the roofing tiles like an ape, Kane dashed for the neighboring building. Not so distant shouts were answering the alarm in the street below, and Kane had no desire to be

caught in the open. Another building stood adjacent to the tenement. Kane threw himself upward to clear the few feet discrepancy between the two structures and started across the steeper sloping roof.

A tile broke loose under his feet halfway up, and Kane skidded dizzily downward, hands clawing to secure a grip! But there was no purchase! Helpless to halt his slide, Kane floundered over the edge and dropped back to the tenement roof. His heart racing, Kane leapt up and began his climb again, thankful that his fall had been only a few feet rather than all the way to the street below. An arrow grazed past to shatter a tile under his fingers. Then Kane gained the crest of the roof and slid clown the other side, protected for the moment.

This side abutted upon a building one floor less in height. Catching the gutter as he reached the edge, he lowered himself over the side and dropped lightly to this next rooftop. Angry shouts sounded closer now as his pursuers sought to close in, but Kane felt more confident. A stairway at the far end of this structure led him down to an alley in back.

On reaching the alley, he pushed through a door in an opposite building and vanished before Gaethaa's men could circle from the other street. While they frenziedly sought to retrace his movements, Kane ducked through several empty buildings and finally reemerged some distance away. The darkening streets cloaked his escape.

The twilight deepened and was swallowed by the night. Across dead Demornte settled the blackness of the tomb. No lights shone in the empty towns and abandoned homes, and a velvet curtain was drawn over the plague scarred corpse of the stricken land. Starlight and gibbous moon looked down on dead Demornte, their soft illumination no more than shading the night to gray. Their glow was like candles burning at a wake, sculpturing the face of the deceased with stark angles and shadowed hollows. Among

the bones of a nation crept the creatures of night, stepping solemnly as mourners through the spectral silence.

In Sebbei only a few houses showed light, and this through cracks in bolted shutters and doors. For death again stalked the streets of Sebbei, and even in their despair the townspeople trembled at the familiar sound of his step. In the darkened streets even the phantoms who nightly walked the stones seemed aware that death had returned to Demornte, and the wraiths melted into the silent shadows, abandoning the night to the spectre of death with his bared sword.

Half a dozen torches blazed yellow in the deserted streets, driving back the shadows as they passed. Grim-faced men cast suspicious eyes over each segment of nighted city laid bare by the torch flames. Warily they searched for some new evidence of their quarry's presence.

Determined to put an end to this deadly match of cat and mouse, Gaethaa grouped his remaining men together and ordered an all night search. Now by torchlight he and his band relentlessly pushed through the city of ghosts, stalking their prey through the now familiar streets and deserted buildings. If this was to be a contest of endurance, Gaethaa meant to give his enemy no chance to rest. Not even Kane could hold up against the strain of ceaseless skulking from place to place, never gaining more than a few steps on his pursuers. And if Kane's role as fox were any less taxing than that of hound, the hounds outnumbered him and could hunt in shifts if need be. Eventually Kane would grow weary and then careless. They would trap him and learn how well an exhausted fox could fight as the pack closed in to kill.

"Hell, I'll lay you odds Kane's clear out of Sebbei right now!" Jan growled, his surly temper worn thin from the hours of tedious search. "Probably sleeping somewhere out beyond the wall—while we're here wearing ruts down the streets. He'd be a fool to stay here inside the walls dodging us all night."

"That's true enough—assuming Kane is running from us," Dron Missa pointed out, an unaccustomed note of unease in his voice. "But that isn't the case here. It seems to me Kane is stalking us just as we're hunting him. We've thought we were hounds chasing down a fox, but I think it's more realistic to consider this a tiger hunt. I was on one once far south of here, and I remember the crawling sense of danger that haunted each step through that shadowy jungle. We were stalking the beast in his own element, and no one had convinced the tiger that he was supposed to be the quarry. Three of us died in the shadows before we finally brought him down."

"Well, it's obvious enough by now that Kane isn't exactly in full flight," Gaethaa broke in brusquely. "We've known that ever since he followed us back to the tavern and murdered Sed tho'Dosso. He's still with us—staying just out of sight like a cobra, waiting for a chance to strike at us. But his boldness will be his undoing eventually—we'll wear him out before he does us. So keep your eyes open, damn it! Remember he's waiting desperately for us to give him an opening!"

Doggedly the Avenger and his men concentrated on their search. Alidore worked his way close to Dron Missa and studied the normally flippant Waldann. "What's the trouble, Missa?" he asked quietly. "I don't recall seeing you in so gloomy a mood before. Is this place getting to you?"

The other man glanced at him edgily, somewhat ashamed at broadcasting his ill ease. "I'm all right. Been a long day, that's all." He paused, "No, that's not all of it. Kane, this place, these people... Something's getting to me. My nerves are all sort of... Well, like on that tiger hunt—right before that striped devil came bounding out of the brush and tore apart the guy three steps back of me. Only I've got the same feeling worse this time... thinking maybe I'll be the one the tiger picks to spring upon this time..."

His voice trailed off uncertainly. Then he smiled and punched

at Alidore's shoulder, his old smile returning. "Look—don't let me pass my bad nerves on to you. I'll be in fine form once we drive Kane out into the open. This monotonous game of poking through a ghost town trying to flush a cobra is not my style, that's all. Give me an open fight, and I'll shake off my depression soon enough."

"Hell, I'm not worried about your nerves, Missa," Alidore assured him. "All of us are on edge by now—who wouldn't be! Kane is feeling it worse than we are though, and my guess is he'll either make a stand or break and ran before much longer. Dawn can't be more than a few hours off."

Death waited in the shadows.

Stealthily Kane raised the heavy trapdoor. Its dry hinges rasped in loud complaint, and Kane uneasily peered about the darkened warehouse. Satisfied that no one was near enough to catch the sound, he grimly inspected the dank smelling subcellar below, then replaced the trap over the opening. Whether the old tunnel still lay open was impossible to say without light, but at least the trapdoor would open for him. Silence. His pursuers had not yet reached the warehouse, although their torches had been drawing close to the seemingly abandoned structure when last Kane had looked outside.

The warehouse was a looming structure of unyielding stone walls, stoutly built to protect costly merchandise from thieves and the elements alike. It stood somewhat apart from neighboring buildings, with only a short open space intervening between its rear wall and the inner wall of the old city. At some time in the past, evidently before the outer wall had been raised, the merchant owners had found it expedient to drive a tunnel beneath the city walls—and thereby link the warehouse with the cellars of another establishment located a short distance beyond the inner city. In those days caravans with trade goods had stopped by the outlying inn to rest and partake of pleasures

offered there. It had been profitable to bring certain goods directly to the warehouse from the inn by way of the tunnel, an artifice which avoided the needless expense of custom duties, as well as suspicious eyes of city officials who might scruple over legal ownership of some items.

The tunnel had fallen into disuse in later times, abandoned altogether after the plague. Kane had discovered it one day while prowling through the deserted city in search of nothing in particular. Despite its advanced state of disrepair, curiosity drove Kane to risk one trip through the tunnel with its rotting timber braces and settling walls. Now he remembered the old warehouse with its smugglers' tunnel, and centered upon this he had planned a rather dangerous attack upon his pursuers—a trap that could strike either way.

As Gaethaa and his men drew close to the deserted warehouse, Kane moved on ahead of them, certain that they would again enter to search again, the dust laden stacks and bales. There was no evidence that the trapdoor had been discovered—it was well concealed, and Kane himself had originally come upon the tunnel from its other end. This would leave him an exit from the warehouse once they knew he was inside. There was no way they could trap him inside—assuming the tunnel had not collapsed since he passed through many weeks before. That was a risk he could not escape at this point, through.

With soft steps Kane ascended the cellar stairs and crossed the darkened warehouse. At the side and rear doors he paused to make certain their heavy bars were in place. A smaller front door was similarly bolted. There remained only the massive main door through which to enter the warehouse. All doors were of thick, iron-bound timber, windows there were none, and the walls built from heavy sandstone blocks. Once the main door too was locked, long hard work with axes and prybars would be needed before entrance could be forced.

About him in the darkness lay boxes and piles of costly merchandise, waiting under a wrapping of dust and spider webbing for buyers who would never come. They formed fantastic shapes in the darkness, crouching patches of blackness against the night—all but invisible until they were brushed upon. Mounds of moldering rugs, rotting heaps of cloth and furs, shelves of tarnished metalwork, pieces of furniture standing in musty aloofness, broken boxes of spices imparting a sick pungency to the odor of decay. Wealth lay crumbling beneath the cold caress of time, and the same vermin now crawled alike over the bones of merchant and buyer and the corpse of their wares.

The warehouse ceiling stretched high, and the door which closed its main entrance was immense. A system of chain and pulleys lifted the main door vertically along grooves cut into the jamb, sliding the heavy barrier upward and down by means of a capstan. Entire wagons could be driven through the doorway when open; once closed it would require a powerful battering ram to smash through. For years the door had stood open, raised upward to the ceiling—the warehouse abandoned to the plague when death claimed its owners.

The capstan mechanism was mounted alongside the front wall. A thick iron chain strained from the winch, ran along heavy pulleys jutting from the stones, and fastened to the massive door. Kane had inspected the fittings on earlier occasions and was familiar with their operation. Now he drew his long sword from across his shoulder and crept into the shadow of some bales piled against the wall close to the capstan. A rat darted away from his boot and scurried off cursing into the darkness. Kane's lips pressed in a thin smile as he saw first flickers of torchlight streak the entranceway, heard shuffle of approaching steps, low mutter of voices. Tightness of anticipation slipped from him. Cunning or foolhardy, he was committed now.

Closer came the light, the sound—spilling echoes across the

deserted darkness within. Light brighter. Figures appeared at the doorway. Entered.

They stood just inside the door, torches raised, eyes narrowly scrutinizing the shadows beyond. Kane mashed himself against the wall, unseen in the cover of the bales. Two had entered. The rest would hold back a moment.

"See anything, Mollyl?" came the call from outside.

"No. There's nothing here—as usual!" came the grumbling reply from the one who bore a hook for a right hand. Jan belligerently pushed his way into the warehouse, Mollyl beside him. They turned to inspect the wall behind them, just as the others moved to follow them inside.

Kane leapt from the shadows and reached the capstan in a bound! Framed against the darkness by yellow torchlight, his blade flashed a menacing gleam, reflected in his eyes!

"Kane! Here he is! Watch out!" Mollyl shouted in warning. From outside Gaethaa swore in triumph.

Only seconds were left to close the trap—or to be crushed in its jaws himself! Kane's right hand lashed out as he gained the capstan—seizing the brake lever and hauling it free! The lever snapped back in his grasp and ripped loose from its fitting! The winch now stood free from its pinion—no brake locked its mechanism to hold the main door suspended!

The door should have fallen. It remained in its place.

Dismayed by the failure of his strategy, Kane wasted a few seconds in sick conjecture. Had he miscalculated the capstan's operation then? Was the mechanism frozen after years of stressed immobility?

Snarling in rage, Kane threw himself against the horizontal crossbars, straining his massive bulk against the capstan handles!

Another few seconds and he would be hemmed in by his enemies! Even now Jan and Mollyl were recovering from initial surprise to attack! Excited shouts, cold death knell of iron, boots pounding for the doorway!

Kane's shoulder struck the crossbar, and seasoned wood cracked. Muscle and timber rebounded. Jolted by the terrific impact, the capstan shuddered and recoiled in submission. With a dry, grinding snarl the mechanism began to rotate! Rusted chain groaned and cracked in protest! The immense overhead door shook itself in angry arousal and broke free of its bed of dust! Debris fell in a trickle then exploded through the night. An inch... three... ten...

Thunder roared in fury as the tons heavy door tore loose and hurled itself down across the entranceway—building to blinding acceleration! The capstan shrieked on its pivot, spun like a gigantic top by the streaking chain. Crossbars whirled a vortex, the wooden arms driving Mollyl and Jan back in alarm. As he darted back from the berserk mechanism, a handle struck Kane across the side and sent him reeling against the wall.

The entire warehouse rocked as the door crashed against its sill with the finality of the gate of hell. Caught by the inertia of its fall, the chain snapped short on the spindle and ripped the spinning capstan free of its smoking mounting. Wooden drum and iron chain lashed across the warehouse like a beheaded python, sending all three men flat behind cover. The mammoth scourge cracked against a pile of crates and exploded into a storm of splintered wood and glassware.

Chips of stone pelted Gaethaa and the other two as they frantically drew back from the downrushing barrier. Clouds of dust blasted their faces, whipped the torches as the door thundered shut. Baffled rage again cut through the chill of death's brush, as Gaethaa howled orders. "Alidore, Missa! Left and right fast! Find an entrance! If they're all locked, we'll break through

the weakest! Damn his cunning! Kane's split us up again, and we've got to get in there fast! Move!"

Within the warehouse silence droned as the dust and echoes fell away. Picking themselves up warily, three killers moved to renew the attack. Mollyl and Jan still field torches, giving light across the interior.

The crossbar had struck only a glancing blow, but Kane's side throbbed agonizingly as he straightened. He shifted weight experimentally, judging from the ache that no ribs had broken. With his right hand he drew his dirk.

"Kane!" Jan hissed. "Remember me? It's been over ten years though—ten years ago when I still had a right hand—and a home and family! But you and your Black Fleet saw to that—didn't you, Kane! Should have cut off my head then, Kane—instead of just a hand! I've hunted you since then, Kane! Missed you at Montes—they said you died there! But I knew you were still alive—still playing your devil's games in other lands! I knew we'd finally cross swords again! Fate ordained this—just as Fate ordained your heart should dangle from Jan's hook!"

"So you know me, Hook?" sneered Kane. "Sorry, but I've forgotten your name as well as your face. I ought to remember anyone fool enough to cross blades twice with me!"

From the side door came the shock of muffled pounding. But Kane knew the timber was sound.

With a snarl Jan hurled his torch at Kane's face! Several yards yet separated them, and Kane easily dodged the missile. Its flames fanned his red beard and smoke stung his eyes, as the torch shot past him to thud against some bales of cloth. Oil soaked fragments spattered across the bales, and the torch spread its flame over musty rolls of fabric.

"Don't lose our light!" cursed Mollyl, lodging his torch between

two crates. "I know you for a black hearted pirate as well, Kane! Surprised to find two of the Island Empire dogging your twisted path even across the sands of Lomarn?"

"Spread out, Jan! We'll find out for ourselves how Kane can fight without his men behind him—see if the serpent can strike when he's chased out of hiding!"

Jan's sword was in his good hand now, and the torchlight caught the razor edge of his hook's inside curve. Dagger replaced torch in Mollyl's grasp, and the Pellinite rushed for Kane with sword thrusting. Jan slid off to the side to press Kane's flank. Behind Kane, flames streaked across the bales of cloth like sparks through tinder.

Crackling heat against his back, Kane's sword sprang across Mollyl's, driving the other man back in a powerful followthrough. His dirk rose to block Jan's blade at the same instant, sparks shooting as the hilt turned the heavier weapon. Desperately Kane backed to the burning mound, preventing his assailants from circling behind. Again and again their blades clashed together, Kane's blinding defense turning aside the attack of two skilled swordsmen. At the side entrance heavy blows shuddered the door against its bolt and hinges, but the thick barrier held. It would take some time for Gaethaa and his men to break through. Neither Kane nor his assailants fought with armor or mail—their duel would be a short one.

The fire at his back spread rapidly, licking across to ignite closely piled heaps of rugs, crates, furniture. Heat became scorching, forcing Kane away from the flames. Smoke stung their eyes and nostrils. Swinging his blade in a whirlwind of death, Kane drove back his opponents' attack and leapt between them. Jan's sword dashed past his shoulder by a finger's width.

Into the open now they fought, Kane pressing more on the offensive as he heard axes bite into the side door. The warehouse

was brightly lit now, as the fire spread across one end. Sheets of smoke poured over the interior, shading the firelight to dark yellow. The countless piles of merchandise threw long, grotesque shadows across the floor and far wall—twisted shapes that drew away in fear from the destroying flames.

With a powerful effort, Kane forced his opponents apart. Before Jan could recover, Kane lunged at Mollyl. The Pellinite lacked the strength to match Kane blow for blow. Frantically he retreated, only barely parrying Kane's thrusts. The flames seared his back now, and his pale face twisted in fear and pain. His defense wavered an instant. Kane's blade slashed downward faster than Mollyl could turn, its tip slicing across the flesh of his sword arm. Dropping his sword with a howl of terror, Mollyl jumped back to avoid Kane's lunge. His impetus carried him over a low crate at the fire's advancing edge! Arms flailing wildly, Mollyl tumbled backwards into a blazing mound of furniture! Flames wrapped about him as he fell, smashing through a red hot jumble of carven wood and padded leather.

Screaming in agony, Mollyl lurched to his feet and stumbled from the blaze, tongues of fire dancing over his hair and clothing! Blinded by the flames, flesh seared and blackened, he flopped across the warehouse floor, smashing into objects in hopeless effort to escape the unendurable pain. Kane ignored him as he crumpled into a writhing mewling smouldering mass.

Kane's concentration on Mollyl gave Jan sufficient time to renew his onslaught. In the seconds it took for Kane to drive Mollyl into the fire, Jan rushed his hated enemy from behind—his sword darting for Kane's back even as Mollyl tumbled onto his pyre. But Kane had not forgotten the other man, and sensing the danger as he heard the scuffle of boots, he twisted sideways to avoid the striking sword tip. Jan's blade shot past him narrowly, but a flash of pain stabbed across his right shoulder as he turned. Jan's hook slashed through leather vest and tore the flesh of his

shoulder, but failed to lodge.

Reeling back, Kane thrust his dirk for the other's side. The agony in his shoulder slowed his movements though, and with a wild laugh Jan jerked his reddened hook against the dagger, skittering down the blade and meshing it into the hilt. The hook's tip gashed Kane's hand, and jerking back Jan tore the dagger from his weakened grasp. Jan yelled in triumph and slashed out with his sword. In red fury Kane beat back his attack and hammered his blade against his assailant's guard. The fire was spreading, and the side door was beginning to splinter. A brutal stroke stunned Jan's sword arm for an instant, and Kane struck before he could parry effectively. His blade tore through the other's side, shearing through ribs and lung! Jan toppled to the floor, eyes brimming hatred through death agony. His sword had fallen, but he crawled on his belly toward Kane, hook outstretched, its razor tip scoring the planks as he dragged his broken body onward. He died as his hook stabbed inches from Kane's boot.

Heat from the fire beat at Kane's face. He stepped back. Already the flames had engulfed the section where Mollyl's body had lain. The side door still held against Gaethaa's assault, but the warehouse was ablaze. Flames now had leapt over half the floor, and in places the planks had given way to collapse into the cellar. It was hard to breathe, even to see with the rapidly building smoke and beat. Hurriedly Kane retrieved his dirk and started for the cellar stairs. His enemies were outside waiting—the tunnel was his only escape now. But if the blazing floor collapsed over the cellar trapdoor before he reached it...

The trapdoor was still clear of flaming wreckage. Seizing a rough torch from the edge of the fire, Kane heaved open the trapdoor and descended the steps into the tunnel. Here the musty dampness of the earth was undisturbed by the holocaust above. Though stale, the dank air was relief from the burning smoke that clicked the warehouse.

Rapidly as he dared, Kane passed through the tunnel. His torch offered poor light, but sufficient to pick out his way. Rotting timbers sagged overhead, bowed out from the walls. Dirt had trickled through to make soft ridges along the floor, and in a few places mounds of debris almost occluded the passage. Gingerly Kane crawled over these crumbling heaps of dirt and shoring, torch outthrust to give light. Clods and sand felt over his back and legs, making a dark paste with the blood that flowed from his cuts.

At any second Kane knew the tunnel might give way altogether, sealing him in this tomb beneath the city of the dead. At one point a dull shock echoed through the tunnel, along with a muffled crash from behind him. The warehouse roof must have fallen, Kane guessed, nervously eyeing the tunnel walls. But by now he had come a good distance beneath the earth, and the tunnel seemed somewhat more solid as he approached its far end.

The floor rose, and a flight of steps appeared before his dying torch. Eagerly Kane ascended them and pushed open the concealed door in the inn's cellars. Moving confidently through the deserted inn, Kane found a door and stepped outside. Within the walls of Sebbei the blazing warehouse threw a glow against black skies soon to gray with dawn.

For the moment his enemies must believe him dead. Wincing at the pain, Kane paused by the inn's wall to wash his scorched, bleeding body and bind his wounds. Three yet lived of those who had hounded him, and neither injuries nor fatigue had abated Kane's fury.

X. Land of the Dead

When smoke began streaming from cracks and opening throughout the warehouse, and the splintering door began to emanate heat from the inferno within, Gaethaa called a halt to their frantic efforts to break in.

"This place is doomed!" he pronounced, laying aside his axe. "Anyone still alive in there has to get out in a hurry, or the smoke will kill them if the flames don't! Jan or Mollyl will open up if Kane hasn't finished them—and if he has, then we'll give Kane the choice of roasting inside or coming out to meet our swords! Either way he'll be burning in hell before dawn breaks! Spread out and watch the doors."

His men did as ordered. One man had always kept watch on the warehouse doors while the other two had attacked the side entrance. Clearly no one had escaped from within while they fruitlessly attempted to break down the door. Swords ready for instant use, they watched vigilantly for one of the doors to swing open, for a figure to stumble out in a shroud of smoke and flame, blinded and coughing. If it should be Kane who emerged, Gaethaa meant to give him scant time to draw clean air into his lungs.

But no door was flung open. No scorched figure stepped out. Crashes from within indicated the floor was giving way, and then came a ripping concussion as the warehouse roof collapsed ponderously upon the wreckage within. A cataclysmic blast of

flame and cinders leapt into the night skies, transforming the yet standing walls of the warehouse into the cone of a volcano. Soon the doors crumpled from the heat, falling inward to reveal a blazing holocaust. Still stood the thick stone walls, red hot now from the furnace that raged within. But long before this, the watchers had ceased to guard the exits.

"Kane's funeral pyre!" observed Gaethaa triumphantly. "He took two more good men with him, but they died as heroes." He turned to accept Alidore's congratulations. "Only three of us left. It's been a costly campaign—the most dangerous of my career clearly. But our goal was a great one, and we have at last met success. History's blackest monster has finally met the death that for centuries he had cheated. Mankind will be grateful for this work we have done. Once again I have cleansed a dark shadow of evil with the cold light of good."

A rustle from the alley behind them abruptly drew attention. "Why, it's the witch," Gaethaa announced, catching sight of her in the light from the blaze.

Rehhaile hung poised at the alley's entrance, almost concealed in the shadow of a building. Firelight shone across her face and limbs, as her blind eyes stared beyond them. She seemed to be summoning the courage to approach them, yet remained on the verge of flight.

Why had she come back? Alidore wondered. Surely her second sight told her she had been seen. Had Kane meant so much to her that she had thrown away all caution just to be present at his death? Alidore sensed a note of jealousy in his musing. "Milord," he began, "can't we forget about her...?"

Gaethaa shrugged. He was in a jubilant mood, and if his lieutenant felt concern for this creature, he could easily grant him his whim. "Sure, Alidore, if this will assuage your misgivings. Kane is dead, and she was only his whore and dupe. She was

punished for her tiny part in his crimes.

"Come on out of the shadows, witch," he called magnanimously. "We have decided to grant clemency. You need have no further fear of our justice. Come see the fate of the monster you served."

Sensing the leniency of the Avenger's disposition, Rehhaile stepped forward to join them. "Kane's dead," she informed them dully. "I knew when you at last cornered him, so I came to be in on the finish, however it turned out. But Kane was trapped within the burning warehouse. He died in the flames—I felt his death in my mind. You destroyed Kane as you had intended; your mission is complete now. Will you leave Sebbei at dawn?"

"So your witch's sight showed you Kane's death," Gaethaa smiled. "I envy you—that was a vision I would have given much to have shared. But see, Alidore—despite your concern for her, she only desires our departure. Well, my men and I will ride on as soon as we've rested and reprovisioned. I never care to wait around for the fulsome praise of those whom I have served—and Sebbei holds little attraction for me. But for now I'll soothe the strain of this mission by basking in the glow of my enemy's death pyre."

"I'll take some fresh air instead," Dron Missa yawned. "The smoke from this pyre is as redolent as a burning dump. Thoem! What kind of junk did they have stuffed away in there!" The Waldann strolled toward the city wall and climbed the steps to the parapet. His lean figure could be seen silhouetted against the graying skies as he leisurely paced alongside ghost guardsmen of dead Sebbei.

Gaethaa the Crusader settled himself against a wall and stretched his long legs out before him. Dreamily he smiled into the dying flames of the warehouse, reliving the excitement of the past days and wondering where the cold light would lead him

next. First to Kamathae for new men and equipment. The death of Kane could occupy the court poets, but elsewhere there were others who needed the help of the Avenger.

Alidore and Rehhaile wandered on down the street. The witch was eager to draw away his lieutenant, Gaethaa mused. Still Alidore seemed fascinated with her, and he was entitled to the diversion.

The lake lay below him, its gray mist rising in the predawn darkness. Idly Dron Missa leaned against the parapet and felt the tight muscles of his back slowly loosen. A scrape of boot on stone met his ear, and he looked up, wondering who had joined him.

A figure approached him along the wall, striding through the mist as ominously as the angel of death. Menace radiated from the fog wrapped figure, shone in his killer's eyes, gleamed along his drawn sword. "Kane!" gasped Missa, recognizing the singed and bandaged swordsman. Only a second did he waste on amazed confoundment. Missa's own blade leapt from scabbard to answer Kane's challenge!

Kane rushed upon the Waldann, his sword hissing through the fog. Missa's blade moved in swift parry, then thrust past in a sudden lunge. Slipping away from the razor point, Kane swore and renewed the fight with more cautious tactics. His opponent was an excellent swordsman, and Kane's stiff right arm could wield his dirk only clumsily. Carefully he pressed his attack, Missa's darting blade baffling his own efforts to overwhelm his guard.

Left-handed opponents Missa had fought before, and he had no difficulty adjusting to the other's stance. Kane's speed amazed him though—astonishing agility for a man of his bulk. And as Kane continued to batter him relentlessly, Missa became conscious of the vast power that underlay his speed. Here was as skillful and deadly an opponent as he had ever confronted, and

only Missa's own brilliant swordplay saved him from Kane's blade time and again. With growing concern, Missa coldly remembered the tales he had heard of Kane—recalled the spectre of violent death that had haunted them ever since Gaethaa began his mission to destroy Kane.

A twinge of pain shot along Missa's right thigh as Kane's partially deflected blade turned to slice shallowly across his leg. Ignoring the wound, Missa fell back a pace as if to stagger. As Kane stepped forward to follow his advantage, Missa raised his sword to parry and lashed out with the dagger in his left hand. Kane's recovery with his own dirk was too slow, and Missa's blade gashed across his ribs fleetingly as Kane twisted away.

Cursing in anger Kane recklessly hurled his dirk at the Waldann. Badly thrown, the blade cleanly missed the other. But as Dron Missa dodged to avoid the streaking knife, his guard fell for an instant. Kane's sword flashed down, slashing Missa's swordarm to the bone—only its downward course spared his arm from amputation. A return flick of Kane's weapon sent his opponent's blade spinning into the dawn mists. Badly wounded and armed with only his dagger, Missa saw Kane's killing stroke slash toward him with dreamlike slowness, nightmare inexorability.

In the split second of life that remained to him, Missa reacted with desperate speed. Darting back from the searching blade, he threw himself from the parapet and dived into the lake below. The darkness, the cold water, received him in a stunning embrace.

Surfacing quickly, Missa paddled away clumsily. His wounds were bleeding freely and stung even more fiercely as the water bathed them. Still they were not of themselves fatal, although disabling. Once he could bind them, stop the bleeding—with proper care they would heal, and not too many months would pass before he could wield a sword as expertly as before. But that

would be for another lord and another cause. Gaethaa's insane missions had paid him well, yet the Crusader had not bought his life. Missa understood concepts of loyalty and duty of mercenary to his lord, but only within reason. Gaethaa's mission to destroy Kane had been cursed with dark fortune from the beginning, and Dron Missa decided it was time for discreet withdrawal. The gods plainly had given him this chance; it would be sacrilege to ignore their intercession.

He looked back at the hulking figure leaning against the parapet in the dawn light. "Go to hell, Kane!" he shouted back, then disappeared into the mists.

When Gaethaa had first heard Missa's shout and the clash of arms, he stared at the scene of combat in disbelief. Then through his astonished mind filtered the incredible truth—Kane still lived! The devil had not died in the flames—by some sorcery he had escaped! The witch had lied to complete the collapse of their vigilance! Now Kane had again returned to strike from the shadows! How many more times could the demon cheat death!

"Alidore! Alidore! Kill that damned witch and get over here quick!" He bellowed shrilly, watching the parapet duel. "Alidore! Run, damn you! Kane's still alive! He's attacked Missa on the wall!"

Forgetting Rehhaile for the moment, Alidore dashed to his lord's call. Against graying skies could be seen the deadly display of swordplay atop the wall. Swords in hand, they rushed to the steps that ascended the wall in this quarter. But the distance was considerable, and as they reached the stairs, they saw the fight's abrupt climax, watched Dron Missa plunge from the parapet into the lake.

"Missa too!" Gaethaa swore in rage, "Now he's killed Missa! I think we fight Lord Tloluvín himself! But we two have not fallen! We'll let Kane taste our iron before this sun has risen!"

Yet when they reached the top, Kane had stolen away into the mists of dawn, eluding them once again.

"He runs from us, milord!" Alidore exclaimed bewilderedly. "Strange Kane should slink off with only two to face. He won't face an opponent in the open it seems."

"No!" hissed Gaethaa, his eyes aflame. "See there on the stones! Blood! A blood trail! Kane's been wounded! Missa died not without giving account! No telling how badly wounded Kane might be! We've put him to flight now though—and here's the trail to lead us to him!"

But the trail of blood dwindled and vanished altogether after they had followed it for only a short distance through the streets of Sebbei, where now the rising sun was cutting through the concealing night. Grimly Gaethaa realized that Kane's wounds had not been as severe as he had hoped. However seriously he might be disabled, at least he had been able to staunch the bleeding. And now Kane had again hidden himself in the maze of dead Sebbei.

"The game continues," intoned Gaethaa heavily. "We have gained nothing. Again we must search for Kane through this damned labyrinthian ghost city, stalking him through his lair. Except today there are only you and I to hunt the tiger, Alidore. We can never destroy Kane like this."

Alidore looked at his lord in concern. There was a sharp cry of despair in Gaethaa's voice that his lieutenant had never heard before. But though the Crusader's lanky figure was slumped and his chin propped against fist, his eyes were lost in thought. His long face bore twisting lines of raw emotion as his keen mind sorted through and rejected dozens of stratagems from past campaigns.

Abruptly his face broke into inspired smile, and a triumphant

laugh barked from his lips. "We're not done yet, Alidore!" he cried wildly. "We'll burn this accursed city to the ground!"

"Burn Sebbei!" Alidore exploded incredulously.

"Right! Burn it all! Let it all burn to the ground! Kane's using these deserted buildings for cover—we'll smoke him out into the open. Thoem knows how he escaped that warehouse without our knowledge, but his cunning won't help him when all Sebbei is in flames! He'll burn with the town, or he'll head for open country. Even if we miss him at first, picking up his trail will be child's play in this ghost land. We'll run him to earth even if he tries to cross the Lomarn—wounded as he is, he won't get that far! No more playing into his traps!"

"Milord Gaethaa!" Alidore protested. "You can't be serious! Burn down the entire city to kill one man! What of the townspeople?"

"Their backbones have dryrot! Don't worry about them. We'll fire a few buildings across the city—enough for the wind to spread the flames over the rest! It will be done before they can lift a hand—not that I believe any man of them has the guts to stop us! Maybe we can tell some that Kane started the fires—might jolt them out of their cowering lassitude to the point they'll tell us where Kane is, though I doubt if they're worth even that!"

"No! I mean, we can't raze an entire city just to destroy Kane! These people will be killed—at best they'll lose everything they possess!"

Gaethaa shrugged impatiently. "The town has no more than a few hundred. Most should escape easily enough, and there's any number of empty towns and villages they can move into. And don't waste pity on them! Had they done their duty to mankind, they would have pitched in and helped us destroy Kane! By their

cowardly negligence they're responsible for the deaths of all my men—as well as being traitors to the cause of good! Burning these whining rats from their rotten dens is a fitting punishment for their complicity! Come on Alidore, we're wasting time!"

Alidore's voice was strained, as he grasped Gaethaa's shoulder and turned him half around. "But to burn an entire city for one man! Kane isn't worth it!"

Face white with rage, Gaethaa threw off his lieutenant's band. "Kane not worth it!" he roared. "Alidore, have you lost your mind! We've crossed half a continent to destroy this demon! All of your comrades have given their lives for this mission! And after all this effort, this sacrifice, the man I came to destroy still mocks me! I'll raze a hundred towns if need be to destroy Kane! Yes, and consider the price a cheap one balanced against the evil this man has committed evil he will continue to bring upon mankind until he is hunted down and slain! What's the worth of this city of ghosts opposed to the greater good of mankind!"

The logic was inescapable, but Alidore still balked. "But the strategy may be entirely in vain!" he argued weakly. "Kane won't be trapped in the flames! He'll escape the city easily—we can't begin to guard the gates, let alone the entire wall! He'll flee Sebbei, and we'll never pick up his trail in the confusion!"

"A general who believes his plan of attack infallible is a fool!" Gaethaa snapped. "Tell me a better one, and I'll accept your counsel. The plain truth is that Kane has beaten us at this damnable game of cat and mouse! He knows Sebbei better than we do, so he has only to lie in wait for us to enter his traps! We failed yesterday with six men—it's hopeless to try again with two! We have to force him into the open—make him run instead of spin webs to ensnare us! Damn it, Alidore—what's wrong with you! Have you lost your ideals and your nerve together!"

The Lartroxian wavered, thoughts spinning in soul wrenching

tumult.

A voice cried out from behind them. "Alidore! What are you doing? Have you completely sold your soul to Gaethaa? That madman and his band of killers have done more evil than Kane has ever been responsible for! Will you help him now to destroy Sebbei and its wretched people on the chance you might kill Kane with this atrocity! Alidore, if you have anything but iron left to your soul, leave Gaethaa! Stop him before he sacrifices more lives to his merciless gods!"

"Ah! I hear a witch!" Gaethaa whispered in knifelike tones. "The same lying voice that told me of Kane's death. Now we see the harvest of false mercy! But it's all apparent. The witch has perverted my lieutenant's soul—twisted his spirit with her sorcery—seduced him to serve the black powers of evil!"

He drew his sword and stepped toward her slowly, blade held low. "Come embrace me, witch!" he hissed. "I think this time you have overestimated my blind stupidity and your own dark glamour as well!"

Alidore leapt in front of him. "Stop, milord!" he pleaded. "She means nothing by her words—she has no sorcery! "

There was pity in Gaethaa's voice as he moved to push Alidore aside. "You're bewitched, Alidore—your reason no longer serves you. Stand back now while my blade severs her spell over you, and sends this witch back to the darkness she serves."

Resolution hardened Alidore's face as he planted himself firmly and drew his own sword. "It's not madness, milord—nor is it Rehhaile's sorcery! I recognize the truth in her words, understand the misgivings that have plagued my spirit these last months! I can't let you kill an innocent girl..."

"Innocent girl! She's a witch! She's lied to you! She's helped Kane strike at us from the first moment we entered Sebbei!"

"...Nor can I permit you to burn this city just to destroy Kane!" Alidore rushed on. "Come on, Gaethaa," he begged. "Let's get out of this land of the dead! We'll return to Kamathae, raise a new army, and return with sufficient strength to destroy Kane!"

"Out of the question! Now Kane knows I intend to kill him! He'll hide where no man could find him—use his evil powers to build up defenses I could never hope to overcome! Stand aside, Alidore, and I'll forget your insane insubordination!"

"I'm sorry, milord Gaethaa," he returned slowly. "You'll kill Rehhaile and raze this city by yourself—but first you'll have to kill me!"

Sudden rage claimed Gaethaa. "Betrayal is it—and from you, Alidore! Damn you—if you stand among the forces of evil, stand against the cold light of good, then by the cold light you shall be destroyed! Get out of my way!"

"Don't force me to cross blades with you, milord!" Alidore's plea was a warning as well.

Gaethaa's face broke into a pale mask of vengeful fury. "You're a fool, Alidore!" he screamed. His sword streaked outward, all but tearing Alidore's weapon from his grip.

Alidore jumped back, blade weaving a defensive pattern. His soul was close to shattering with the conflicting emotions that raged through him. His entire universe had suddenly collapsed about him, so that now he found himself locked in deadly combat with the man for whom an hour ago he would have willingly given his life. Suddenly he was pitted against the beliefs and ideals he had sworn allegiance to all his life. Spurred out of his emotional maelstrom only by the instincts of self-preservation, he desperately parried Gaethaa's maddened attack.

It was not the state of mind to offer a chance against an opponent of Gaethaa's prowess. Rapidly, easily the Crusader

wore down his guard. A sudden thrust Jay open Alidore's side, and as he recoiled in pain, a glancing stroke tore off his helmet. Alidore was driven to the ground, blackness flashing through his skull, while his eyes were blinded by blood pouring from his gashed brow. A thousand miles away echoed a girl's scream.

Gaethaa surveyed his fallen lieutenant, madness still in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Alidore," he intoned with heavy regret. "You were a brother to me—a friend through many battles. Though I must kill you now to purge this evil spell that has stolen you from me, I'll always remember you as the loyal and courageous lieutenant you once were to me." He raised his sword for the *coup de grace*. "The tales spoke of the evil curse that follows Kane—evil that destroys those who cross his twisted path. Now I understand the truth behind those legends. Good-bye, Alidore—Kane has destroyed you, but die assured that you will be avenged!"

"Hell, kill him if you're going to—but don't give me credit for it. It bothers me to accept favors from a man I'm going to kill in another minute." The mocking voice grated from the street behind Gaethaa. "Or if you're embarrassed to kill a friend, let him lie there and I'll finish him after I've carved out your heart."

Gaethaa whirled to face Kane. His enemy stepped from out of the fog and smoke and casually strode toward him, sword poised. Rough bandages were bound across his ribs; others made crimson bands across his right shoulder. A murderous light shone from his blue eyes, brutal face drawn in a savage snarl.

"So the tiger has come out of hiding!" Gaethaa purred. "I had thought I'd be forced to smoke you from your lair! But now comes the final cast of dice in this game we've played, and it's only fitting that the principal players should meet at last. You've cost me every man in my command, Kane—it's for their lives you now must answer—and for the centuries of crimes that lie behind you like an accusing shadow!"

"You've achieved a fair number of atrocities in your own short career—soon to be lamented!" sneered Kane, raising his sword.

Gaethaa's silent lunge brought them together. Their swords clashed and locked, then Kane hurled the lighter man back. The knife in Gaethaa's other hand sliced empty air. Blow upon blow hammered a vicious cacophony to death. Kane's right arm was all but useless to him, but the dazzling speed of his sword arm made the loss seem minor.

"Call upon the forces of evil to aid you, Kane!" jeered Gaethaa, observing the crimson stigma of fresh blood spread over Kane's bandages. The wounds were opening, and soon his strength would waver. "Or have your dark gods left you in fear, just as evil must always flee before the invincible sword of good!"

"I serve neither gods nor fool's causes!" Kane growled. "And don't delude yourself into terming invincible principles that are meaningless except to the relative viewpoint of the beholder!" His apparent feint twisted into a sudden lunge that sliced across Gaethaa's cheek. "First blood!" he laughed.

The men struggled on in silence then, voiceless save for panting breath and animal grunts. Gaethaa was a deadly opponent—a shrewd and skillful swordsman with wiry strength driving his long frame. In addition he was relatively fresh, while Kane was fatigued and bleeding from wounds suffered in recent combat. Still his endurance did not falter before the Avenger's fanatical attack, nor did the lethal beauty of his swordplay grow strained. Relentlessly the two men slashed and thrust, parried and feinted—each confident that his attack would exhaust the other and soon bring an end to the stalemate.

Again their swords locked hilts. They strained against one another, man to man, blade to blade—a split second would see them thrown apart again! Gaethaa's dagger slipped past Kane's

guard and slithered for his side. Heaving against the other blade, Kane threw Gaethaa back a step, dropping his own knife at the same instant. As Gaethaa fell away, Kane seized his left wrist in passing. Forcing the thick muscles of his injured arm to respond, Kane crushed the wrist in his grip and bent it back as his enemy lunged away. Gaethaa's dagger stabbed around to gash his arm. Then with a grating snap, the forearm bones cracked under the twisting pressure.

Gaethaa gasped and swung his sword wildly at Kane's arm, frantic to relieve the crushing agony. Kane released his grip and jerked his arm clear. At the same moment his sword flashed out at Gaethaa's unprotected trunk, before the other could recover his guard. The powerful blow clove down through Gaethaa's right shoulder, all but severing arm from trunk! Kane's reddened blade gleamed and slashed out again, catching his opponent as he spun about and sundering head from body! The head bounced twice with a hollow tolling.

Kane stood before the grotesquely strewn corpse of Gaethaa the Crusader, sucking great gasps of air into his hammering chest. In the crisp dawn chill tiny tendrils of smoke seemed to writhe from the scarlet splashed stones, from his dripping sword, from his torn flesh. It blended with his steaming breath and vanished into the morning mist.

Shaking himself wearily, Kane frowned at Alidore's fallen form, stretched out across the deserted street, his head staining Rehhaile's skirt. Kane strode toward him purposefully.

"Don't, Kane!" Rehhaile pleaded. "Please don't kill this one! Alidore saved my life several times from those killers! Spare him now for me! Please, Kane! Alidore can't harm you now!"

Kane swayed before them, sword raised, murder lust still twisting his face. Alidore stared up at him blankly, face an expressionless mask. No move did he offer in defense or in flight;

his eyes met Kane's in uncaring gaze. With a shrug Kane lowered his blade, blood fury slipping from his face—only to remain smoldering in his eyes, where its fires never slaked.

"All right, Rehhaile," he said. "I give him to you. But I doubt that your pity will be of much use to him. It seems that Gaethaa's blow knocked loose his brain inside that thick skull."

"No, Kane! It's his soul that's torn loose within him! I can heal his spirit's torment in time."

"So that's it," Kane laughed mirthlessly. "No point in asking you to come with me then, I see. Just as well. I'm leaving now, Rehhaile. I've had my fill of living among ghosts. I'm sick of morbid brooding—there's still adventure to amuse me in the world outside. Your companionship here has been interesting—soothing. I'm grateful."

"Good-bye, Kane," said Rehhaile softly, turning her mind from the winter of his thoughts and spirit.

Kane muttered something she did not quite bear, then turned and stalked away down the empty streets. The ghosts of dead Demornte watched him depart. Go from Demornte, land of the dead, world of shadows, where death has lain and life cannot linger.

Alidore stirred. Sitting up dizzily he reached for his fallen sword. With shaking hands he placed its point against his chest. His universe had toppled, pinning him in the wreckage of his unshakable beliefs, unassailable truths. What use to survive tire death of his gods?

"Alidore! Don't!" screamed Rehhaile, sensing what he was about to do. "For my sake—don't! I want you to live! Together we can leave this land of the dead—we can go out into the world of life!"

"I thought I followed the cold clear light of right, of god," Alidore spoke in agony. "Instead I served the cold light of death!"

The swordpoint wavered against his chest. The soothing oblivion of death? Or try to return to life with Rehhaile? His soul was too wounded to decide.