

Lynortis Reprise
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Prologue

High above the blighted wasteland Lynortis broods in gloomy majesty. Lofty eyrie on a fang of sandstone, the fallen citadel stares out over the silent wilderness of desolation far below. Lynortis. Fortress city whose walls no army could overwhelm. Tyrant lord of the limitless forestlands sprawled at its feet.

Lynortis, your eyes are sightless now, and the rich rolling valley over which you reigned is the boneyard of two hundred thousand souls. Lynortis is dead, and there are no mourners. No longer do carrion hawks nest in your gutted halls; even the jackals have abandoned your dunes of bleached bones. Alone and silent, you are the funeral obelisk for your unburied tens of thousands--and for the bones of your conqueror. When slayer kills slayer, all are one with the slain.

Two nations died here although one was hailed victor. Ask the dead whose side won the war.

I Hunters in the Forest

The girl's breath came in ragged sobs, and her stride was a broken stumble. Hours before, her long legs had run swift, sure as a deer beneath the misshapen trees. A deer is swift, but hounds are patient. Since noon they had hunted her through that insane nightmare of moss-grown destruction. Now her tanned legs were scratched and bruised as they pumped wearily beneath the thorn-laced branches, and her bare feet left smears of blood upon the gnarled roots. Her long brown hair was disordered with twigs and moss; her thigh-length shapeless gown hung in grimy tatters about her lithe figure. The only sound she uttered was the jagged rhythm of her breath.

"Not here!" The hoarse drawl came dimly front a hundred yards to her right. "Not here!" An answering bail from her left, and closer. There echoed a stamp of hooves and jingle of harness.

She darted into the wreckage of a huge trebuchet. A tent of saw-briar overgrew the rotting beam of its counterweight, and the shadowy shelter within was tiger-striped by the declining sun. Heedless of tearing thorns, she wriggled closer to the charred timbers of the mammoth siege machine. Smearred with soot and leaf mould, her tanned limbs and shift of coarse brown cloth merged with the rotting timbers of the apparatus. Against her thin face her brown eyes seemed large as those of some nocturnal creature. She froze--motionless save the fast rise and fall of her high breasts and the quick, hunted flicker of her eyes.

At first there had been hounds. They had almost caught her then. But she had

slithered breathlessly through a debris-choked tunnel, and when the baying pack had followed, the rotted shoring had given way. Now men's eyes had to search out her trail, and it was enough to hold a scant lead.

A moss-grown skull stared up at her, the rest of its bones still crushed beneath the throwing arm of the trebuchet. Two skeletons in rotting mail lay half-buried in the earthworks, ensnared in a nest of saw-briar. Near her feet lay a rust-pitted dagger; a mouldering swordhilt protruded from beneath the wreckage of the throwing arm. The rusted weapons gave her comfort no more than the rotted bones caused her fear. Her terror was of the present, and of the savage men who hunted her.

"Here! Fresh blood!"

From behind her--and close. She had been unable to bide her trail. Her concealment was no refuge.

Hopelessly she broke from cover, flinging herself past the shroud of thorns. Their excited shouts were close--in a few seconds they would reach the ruined siege engine. Rank brush and twisted second-growth trees promised scarce cover to bide her flight.

"Yo! That's her!"

Terror urged another burst of strength to her aching legs. She dashed headlong through this graveyard of a battle three decades silent. Each breath was agony, and still her lungs could not draw breath enough.

They were following close to her heels, confused in the war-scarred forest, making too much noise themselves to catch the sound of her flight. But they had horses.

She hurtled the fallen beams of a smashed springald, stumbling over the piled rusted fragments of its iron-headed bolts. It brought her up just short of a weed-grown trench that lay hidden a stop beyond. But this was a region of the battleground she did not recognize, and she dared not chance shelter that might instead be a cul-de-sac.

A tangle of yellowed bones filled its bottom, she saw as she leaped scrambling across. Then into a brush-grown ravine a dozen painful strides beyond. Wriggle snake-like down its slope, where bones line the eroded dirt like cobblestones. They are stopping by the trench, making certain their quarry doesn't hide there...

The gully emptied into a wash of detritus and sparse scrub. Beyond lay a thick stand of broken trees--cover, if she could reach it. She darted onto the wash, keeping low.

"Yee-hee!"

She skidded on the loose rubble of the clearing. Half a dozen horsemen broke through the patch of woods ahead. They had encircled her.

"Here! We got her!" They pounded toward her.

She spun, but there was no escape behind. The others were pelting down from beside the ravine she had quitted. She stood in full sight in the low scrub of the wash. Again she whirled. She was trapped.

Fear twisted her face. They laughed as they closed on her, this band of forest outlaws who would take their time before letting her die. Hard-faced killers whose plundered gear was as mismatched as the men who wore it. They moved in slowly, tempting her to try to run through their circle.

She sobbed a curse at them--half-crouched, backing away as one moved closer, spinning about as another crept still closer from behind. They were playing with the prey who had cost them so much toil. A circle of grinning wolfish faces, casually moving in across the space of washed stone and dry bones. The lead horse of the group that had waited in the timber stalked toward her. Its fat rider was the bandit chief, Grey--who had let his men drive his quarry into his dread grasp. His blubbery lips twitched in a triumphant grin. Then his horse stumbled, its hoof breaking through the gravelled crust with an eerie brittle smash.

Man and steed screamed in tearing agony. From the splintered bubble beneath the wash erupted a spewing mist of black vapor, flowing heavily across the barren space.

The horse plunged to the ground, spilling its rider in a writhing heap that spared him the mercy of a broken neck. She could see the blackened skin slough away from blistered features as the outlaw leader screamed mindlessly for a moment longer. And already the black mist had billowed over those who were with him.

Those who yet could, fled in desperate panic. The black vapor swirled like a hell-driven cloud, flowing across the wash--breathing its searing death upon all who were near.

The wind was blowing back toward the ravine, she saw, and carefully gauged the spreading cloud. Of those with Grey, all lay shrieking on the bone-strewn gravel. Those who had hounded her were trying to outrace the mist, in their terror forgetting their prey.

Somewhere she found strength for a final burst of speed. Perilously skirting the advancing cloud of vapor, she escaped its withering tendrils and reached the patch of forest that lay upwind. The vapor would slowly dissipate, but by the time the survivors regrouped it would be dark--if any still had heart for their game.

On failing legs she stumbled into the shelter of the gnarled trees. And into the grasp of the man who stood watching from their shadow.

She opened her mouth to scream, but already one spade-like hand smothered her lips, while the other enclosed her wrists. With desperate strength she struggled against him, but he held her fast with casual strength.

"Quiet!" His voice rumbled in her ear. "I won't hurt you!"

She shuddered and hung limp in his arms. Her heart hammered painfully, but it was useless to try to break away.

He removed his hand from her lips, but retained his grip on her wrists. "Don't worry, I'm not with them," he told her. "Let's just rest easy now, and let the survivors distance between us. I think they're too demoralized for any more of this."

He added, "What's your name?"

"Sesi," she admitted, after a pause. She twisted about to get her first good look at the man who held her.

No wonder she had not seen him as she plunged into the trees--he might have been one of the gnarled and massive trunks come to life. While he was not much above the average height of a big man, he was built on the solid scale of an ancient oak. Chest and torso broad and hard as some mighty bole, pillar-like legs, arms thick with corded muscle--all gave him an aura of massiveness more than size, of awesome and irresistible strength. The long-fingered hand that pinned her wrists was large and sinewed; coarse red hair furred its back and the thick forearm. He wore a leather vest trimmed with tufted wolf fur and silver conchos, laced half-open, and a shirt of light mail beneath. Tight leather trousers flared to cover high riding boots. A heavy knife was sheathed at his belt, and the curiously wrought hilt of a broadsword protruded from behind his right shoulder. Sesi had never known a man to carry his sword strapped diagonally behind his back, and she judged him an outlander.

A short beard rusted his coarse-featured face and nape-length red hair was tied by a leather band sewn with bright bits of girasole above the craggy brow. His eyes... Sesi shivered. Cold, blue. Eyes of a killer... eyes that had watched many a man die, had absorbed a fragment of each death, and the essence of death flamed within their blue depths.

"I am called Kane."

And Sesi tore her eyes away, wondered for a moment whether her escape from her pursuers had been good fortune.

Kane released her, and she pulled away from him. Her wide eyes regarded him nervously, as she tried to gather the edges of a tear that opened her shift halfway up her side.

"Who were they?" He asked casually.

"Bandits. Scavengers. Their sort prey on travellers in the mountains nearby. Sometimes they slink into the battlefield to steal from the dead. Masale decreed that this all be left untouched as a monument to his victory--but no

one guards the field, and the vultures creep in for what they can steal. There is iron, gold..."

"I see bones."

"There are bones."

"Why were they chasing you?"

Sesi knotted the frayed edges of her gown over the tanned curve of her hip.

"Can't you guess?"

He studied her, then shrugged, face impassive. She could not read his thoughts. "They went to great effort."

"You saw?" She combed fingers through her tangled mane.

"I was curious to know why a gang of petty killers was so desperately searching the forest."

"Why are you here? This land is forbidden to all."

"Do you live here?" he asked instead.

"There are a few of us," she told him uneasily,

"Then I'll take you there."

"I can find my way."

Kane shook his head. "It's growing dark, and this land is treacherous with overgrown pits and unexploded shells--as those who hunted you learned. My horse is not far."

Sesi shrugged wearily and followed the stranger. It seemed dangerous to trust a man with eyes like Kane's, but then she had little choice.

II

The Key

The fire-blackened stone walls stood roofless beneath greying skies. Ragged gaps in the masonry evidenced the impact of stone missiles flung from mammoth siege engines from the fortress high above. One wing lay in a smashed jumble of weed-grown debris; the main hall was gutted to bare walls. Incongruously spared amidst splintered stone, a stained glass rose window flamed red, gold, and blue in the dying light.

Once the wooded plain at Lynortis's feet had known many stately manor houses such as this. Two years of unleashed hell had smashed the land and its people like a princess's doll--things in the path of a mad stampede. The marvel was that this much of the mansion yet stood one stone upon another.

A far wing--once kitchens and servants' quarters--showed a streak of smoke from a broken chimney. Yellow light leaked through chinks in the boarded windows, and the broken roof showed crude repairs. A gaunt-ribbed cur snarled from the shelter of a wall as Kane approached.

"Let me down. They'll want to know," Sesi slipped from Kane's saddle and limped toward the low stone building.

Kane sat on his horse, sensing the eyes that watched from within. Casually his fingers freed the clasp that held his scabbard to his left hip. A tug on the hilt would pivot the scabbard on its shoulder swivel, freeing the blade in an instant.

"Hranal!" She pushed at the door. "It's all right. Let me in."

The dog--he was not growling a challenge. He was snarling in fear. Kane realized it just as the door was flung open.

Her scream and the scrape of Kane's blade clearing the scabbard shivered in the air at the same instant. Kane spurred his mount toward the door, but already strong arms had yanked Sesi inside.

The door was too low, or Kane would have bolted through--with room to maneuver, a mounted swordsman could break up any free-for-all. Instead Kane leaped from his saddle and squinted into the dimness within--warily holding

onto the reins. Several shadowy shapes struggled inside the low-ceilinged room. Kane started for the door, and a tall figure barred his way.

"Kane! Wait!" the man shouted. "This isn't your fight!"

Kane paused, watching the other's poised blade. Inside, the struggle subsided. The figure stepped from the doorway--a broad-shouldered blond man in silver-studded mail.

"Kane! By the Seven! I said that has to be Kane when I saw you ride up!"

"Hello, Jeresen." There were lines of hard living and a long sear that had not been there fifteen years before, but the face was one he knew well. A suggestion of paunch and shadows beneath his eyes indicated the mercenary captain had lived well before hard times left their recent mark.

The big blond-bearded man grinned and sheathed his sword. "Been a long time, Kane since you and me put Roderic on his brother's throne."

Kane nodded, casually lowering his swordpoint. "That was a good fight, Jeresen. What eventually happened after I had to leave?"

Jeresen chuckled. "After Roderic calmed down, I got your old job. Now and again someone would have doubts as to the justice of Roderic's claim to the throne--enough to keep it interesting, and remind Roderic he needed me and my men. Few years back, Roderic bit into a kidney with some unsuspected spices in it. After that, all hell broke loose, and when we finally cut our way out of there, there wasn't much left of us. Since then we've done one thing or another. Yourself?"

"One thing or another."

Jeresen eyed him suspiciously. "What are you doing here?"

"Going from one place to another. Lynortis is a good place to pass through when you don't care to meet anyone."

"Yeah, I'll bet," grinned Jeresen. "What were you doing with the girl?"

"Picked her up along the battlefield. She was running from a gang of bandits, until their leader's horse smashed an unexploded gas bomb. I was carrying her back here hoping for shelter for the night."

Jeresen swore exultantly. "That was that son of a bitch, Grey! So the goddam fool busted open an old Lynortian gas bomb, did he? Wish I'd seen it! The bastard was trying to steal the key to a fortune right out of my grasp!"

"Key to a fortune?"

"Yeah, that's what you had coozied up on your saddle with you just now. Hell, come on in, and I'll tell it over a few bottles. There's gold enough in this to share with all my old comrades."

Kane returned his sword to its scabbard and followed Jeresen into the mined wing. Inside were maybe ten armed men--blond Waldann mercenaries under Jeresen's command. Kane recognized a few faces and exchanged greetings. He guessed there must be others who had not joined them--unless this battered handful were all that remained of the once formidable troop that had followed Jeresen northward to earn a living by their blades.

Sesi, her arms tied behind her back, hunched miserably in a chair. Her eyes sought Kane in desperate hope. There was blood on the stones of the floor, and the old couple who cowered in one corner of the kitchen would not help her.

Neither would the heavysset man who lay in the center of the crimson stain.

Kane looked away and sat down at the long table.

"Hranal! Wine!" Jeresen yelled to the elderly man, who was dabbing at his smashed lip. "Wine for us now--then have your woman cook meat. Make it good, or you know what to expect. Laddos, go with him."

He sat across from Kane. "The place is a ruin, but the cellar still has bottles of rare vintage unbroken by the siege. So you're only passing through. There's a coincidence."

Kane declined to press matters. "A fortune, you were saying."

The Waldann captain grunted. "Silver, gold, gems--as much as every man can carry if we're quick."

"How quick?"

"We'd better be out of here by daylight."

"There's nothing here but the bones of two armies."

"More than that if you know where to look," Jeresen assured him. "Been near thirty years since Lynortis fell, but what we're looking for won't have rotted."

The old man returned with dusty bottles of wine. Jeresen watched him pour with relish, warming to his tale. "Hell, Kane, you know the story as well as I do, probably. How Masale of Wesvetin gathered together an army from the slopes of the Myceum range and marched with a hundred thousand men to carve an empire from the lands of North Lartroxia. In the path of conquest stood Lynortis, a fortress city carved from the top of a mountain and said to be unassailable. The lords of Lynortis ruled the great valley stretched below, and the citadel had for centuries considered Lartroxia's plains its fief. Masale knew Lynortis had to fall. He ravaged the towns and holdings at the city's feet, then laid siege to Lynortis itself. A hundred thousand men against a single fortress. "It wasn't battle; it was endless slaughter. Unassailable walls atop a sheer pinnacle of rock. Gods! How many thousands died in senseless assaults! Two years Masale besieged Lynortis. Two years his giant siege machines hurled rocks, spears, and flaming balls of pitch at the fortress, and the catapults of Lynortis returned the barrage undaunted--and rained death in glass shells of burning phosphorus and deadly vapors fashioned by the wizards of Lynortis from secrets they found under the earth. Plague and famine slew thousands more. The conqueror's army rotted away before his eyes; the entire land became a desert of destruction--still Lynortis withstood Masale's siege. Masale, who had never lost a battle, could not bring the fortress to its knees, not by might of arms, not by starvation--for Lynortis somehow was provisioned.

"At last the fortress fell by treachery. There were passages through the rock spire that opened onto the valley below. After two years of siege, someone showed Masale the way through the mountain--led the conqueror and the remnant of his army secretly into Lynortis on one moonless night. The final battle was a hard one, but the city was taken unaware, and two years of siege had left its defenders weakened. By dawn Masale was in command of a city of the dead, and the rocks far below were splattered with broken bodies of all those who had escaped his army's steel.

"Masale left Lynortis in flames, boasting that he had spared not one life of all within. But his dream of empire died at Lynortis as well, for scarcely twenty thousand remained of his army of conquest. Masale returned to Wesvetin with nothing to show for his dream but a land drained white of its blood and its wealth."

Jeresen paused for a huge swallow of wine. Kane waited for him to recount something not common knowledge.

"He brought back one survivor as part of the plunder of Lynortis--Reallis, the young daughter of Yosahcora, its last ruler. It gave him some bitter satisfaction to have his enemy's child as slave and whore. Often when despair was upon him he amused himself with Reallis, until at length it seemed she would bear his bastard. Masale meant to kill her then, it's said--but the girl disappeared. Escaped, Masale thundered, and his people wondered why he bothered to lie.

"But Reallis did escape somehow. Survivors of Lynortis, or enemies who sought to use his bastard against him? Who knows? For Reallis was never heard from again. Now, twenty years later, word comes to Masale that Reallis had escaped to hide among the few refugees who live among the ruins of the battleground--and that Reallis had given birth to a daughter. Word got out finally through some drifter who'd been holed up here. Took a fancy to the daughter, but couldn't get to her because she was always inside tending to her mother, who was dying of fever. One night he sneaked in and got close enough to overhear Reallis on her deathbed telling the daughter all about a secret room piled high with gold and jewels hidden somewhere in the, caverns beneath Lynortis. He couldn't get close enough to hear where the treasure was hidden, but the daughter was there until the end and heard it all. Next night he tried to get to the girl, but they caught him and beat him half to death. So he limped off and came to Masale with his story--figuring on sharing in the

treasure when Masale got his hands on it. Masale sweated him pretty hard before he was certain it wasn't some trick. The bastard talked a lot and loud on the rack. Not everyone who listened was as hard to convince as Masale." Jeresen drained his cup with a flourish and pointed. "Word reached me through Bonaec there. He was hired to Masale, but after what he heard he shipped out and came running back to his old captain for help in beating Masale to the treasure. Bastard in my own outfit then sold out to Grey for a bigger cut of the gold. Grey's boys got here a hair before we did, and now I'm certain Masale is hard on our heels."

All eyes were fixed on Sesi. She stared hopelessly at the floor, uttering no sound.

"Just a matter of getting her to talk." Jeresen grinned. "We'll grab what we can carry and make a run. You'll have equal share, too, Kane. Not that I'm doing it all for old times' sake. We may have to fight past Masale, and I know what you're worth in a fight. Agreed?"

"Of course," Kane said, draining his own cup.

Jeresen grunted and clapped Kane's thick shoulder. "Well, enough, then. And time to move." He smiled wolfishly at the bound girl. "You see we know what the score is, Sesi. Tell us quick where the treasure lies hidden, and I'll take you with us beyond Masale's reach--and your lap'll be heaped high with gold. It's the only choice you have."

Her voice was almost too low to bear. "I don't suppose it would do any good to tell you I don't know what you're talking about."

Jeresen hit her without seeming to move. Her head flew back. Blood started from her nose. The circle of eyes watched mercilessly.

"All right," Sesi said shakily. "But I can't describe the place. Give me a horse, and I'll lead you there."

"Very smart," Jeresen congratulated. "Bonaec, make a noose for her neck. Sesi, I hope you don't think you can slip away in the dark. We really don't have time to waste."

Be watched Bonaec haul the girl to her feet and snug a noose to her throat. The stocky mercenary paid out several feet of stack and tied the other end to his thick wrist.

"The first time you cause me to find fault with you," Jeresen told the girl, "I'll tell Bonaec to cut off your ears. Bonaec will enjoy that. So will I. So make sure you don't make us wait too long to get to that gold."

III

As Night Closes

There had been more of the Waldanns--another thirty men left with the horses a distance from the ruined manor. Jeresen had not expected resistance from the few refugees who lived there, and more men might have warned Sesi away. The girl was lifted onto a saddle, and the others swiftly mounted to follow her lead. Night was fast closing over the battle-scarred forest, and, Kane noted, there would be no moon tonight.

"I don't understand how Masale could have missed a room full of gold," Kane remarked to Jeresen.

The Waldann captain paused to shout an order. "It was hidden in the caverns beneath Lynortis. Few knew its secret, and Masale took no prisoners when the city fell. It was a treasure Yosahcora had amassed to buy an army to break the siege. There were those who didn't care to see Masale continue his march to empire. The treasure was to persuade them to attack Masale and lift the siege--Yosahcora had planned to send part of the gold out through the secret passageways with a few trusted agents. But Lynortis fell before his plan could

be tried, and Reallis was the only one left alive who knew of the treasure. She wasn't inclined to share the secret with Masale."

Kane nodded. "Sounds plausible. And you're certain Sesi knows the secret?"

"She'd better," Jeresen stated. "I need this gold, Kane. The years don't seem to have bothered you, but I'm pushing fifty. You don't get much older in this game, and I've nothing to show for my years of living close to death but a few beat-up veterans to follow me and less gold between us than a lord squanders on his whores on a night of slumming."

He broke off and studied the shattered terrain. "Maybe we'd better light torches. It's getting dark, and there's no trails through this damn junk pile."

Shadows lay thick over the nightmarish tangle of blasted trees, rotting siege machines, weed-grown embankments. Ahead of them loomed a huge ballista, its giant timbers charred and frozen as if the phosphorus bomb that seared its catapult and the crew had struck only hours ago. Charred skeletons yet manned its broken arm. Touch a man with fire hot enough, mused Kane, and his bones will last forever.

High above them Lynortis looked down--a ruined fortress atop a spike of sandstone thousands of feet high. Kane could barely make out the narrow roadway carved into the face of the stone, spiralling the pinnacle to a dizzying summit. Stones hurled from that height had gouged craters into the earth as deep as a man was tall.

Cautiously they worked around the earthworks of the ruined ballista. Trenches and craters scarred the terrain, and where the earth was not barren from some still virulent poison, scrub growth of three decades made their passage almost impossible.

"Can't you find a better trail?" Jeresen demanded of his captive.

Sesi shook her head. Her horse and Bonaec's led the way. "We are following a trail of sorts. You forget that the battlefield has been deserted these many years."

"Well, something's been going through here," Jeresen pointed out. "There's tunnels running through the scrub."

Sesi's horse screamed and plunged forward--its hooves breaking through the crumbling sides of an unseen trench. Wrists bound behind her back, Sesi fell from her saddle. Her neck jerked back with the throttling halter as the falling horse carried her into the hidden trench.

Kane's sword slashed across the tethering rope just as the slack snapped taut. The strands parted with a crack an instant before the noose could break her neck, and Sesi rolled away from her stricken mount, into the weed-buried earthworks. Her legs flashed white as she wriggled head first into cover.

"Get her!" Jeresen yelled. Bonaec leaped from his saddle and dove into the trench after her. Its log broken, the foundered horse lay on its back at the bottom, hooves thrashing dangerously. The thickset Waldann skidded around it and plunged through the brush where the girl's long legs had disappeared.

Farther back, the others milled in confusion, not knowing what had happened in the thick gloom.

Jeresen bawled orders for his men to encircle the trench. Horses crashed and stumbled as cursing riders tried to force them through the twilight wasteland.

"If she gets away in the darkness..." snarled Jeresen in a rage.

"She can't run far with her hands tied," Kane said. "She would have told us nothing with a broken neck."

"Hell, you did the only thing..." Jeresen started to say.

A scream echoed eerily from the bottom of the trench. Bonaec. He only screamed once.

Someone finally lit a torch. Men dropped into the trench and forced their way into the tunneled path through the thick scrub. In a moment they backed out, dragging Bonaec by his heels. They didn't find the mercenary's head. Nor did they find Sesi.

"There's a tunnel down here!" someone announced, as their blades hacked away the cover of undergrowth. "This animal trail runs straight into an old

tunnel!"

"Then follow it!" Jeresen yelled, and swore as they slowly obeyed him. Farther down the line of the trench, his riders were finding no sign of the girl.

"She knew it was here," Kane decided. "Rode her horse into the trench and chanced it. Masale's army spent two years digging tunnels and earthworks against the counter-bombardment. If Sesi knows the battlefield, she could be crawling off to hide where we'll never find her."

"Found an old blade down there, too," Jeresen surmised gloomily. "Sawed her hands free and lopped old Bonaec's head off when he crawled after her."

"Must have been a dull blade," observed Kane. "From the stump of his neck I'd say his head was chewed off."

IV

The Hand of Kane

"I wouldn't be out there tonight for a pile of gold as high as Lynortis," grumbled Hranal, handing Kane a platter of boiled meat. "Too many men died out there."

"Oil?" said Kane, jerking his hand away from the steaming meat. After an hour of scouting around the site of Sesi's disappearance, Kane had decided the girl had made good her escape--at least until daylight. Leaving the problem to Jeresen, he returned to the ruined manor for a long-deferred meal. If Jeresen wanted his men to risk their necks in a pointless search, that was between the Waldanns and their leader.

"Too many died," Hranal repeated. "Too many to stay dead on nights like this. I've seen things moving around the old battleground in the dark of the moon, and I've stayed behind bolted doors since."

"You're full of crap, old man," muttered Laddos, who had remained behind to watch the manor and its tenants. "Dead men stay dead--unless there's sorcery at work. Ain't nothing but bones here." He dug a grimy hand into the platter. The old man stared at the mercenary without anger. He and his wife had shown little emotion after their initial terror, serving the Waldanns' wants in docile silence. "You may have seen many a man die," he stated, "but you never were in a battle like this one. There never was a battle like the siege of Lynortis. They died here by the thousands. Suicide assaults to storm the fortress walls--when the roadway was buried tinder crushed bodies twenty deep. Then the months and months of siege--stones and springald bolts dropping down day and night, bodies smashed and skewered. And the glass bombs of phosphorus and black vapor bursting over the trenches--they died by the hundreds then, burnt to the bone and screaming their insides out. You can see whole sections of the battlefield at night ghost-lit where the phosphorus bombs struck."

"I've been through sieges," Laddos growled.

"Not like this one. There never was a siege like this one. Masale was determined to take Lynortis--kept bringing in new troops as fast as they could die. He came here with a hundred thousand men, and he must have brought in at least that many more as the siege wore on--no one knows how many. And plague set in when the countless dead were piled in heaps as high as Lynortis. They couldn't bury that many dead, they couldn't burn that many dead, they couldn't carry that many off. For two years the air was foul with death, and the survivors fought on behind breastworks of the dead.

"Then the night Lynortis fell. You could hear their screams all through the night, and at dawn the pinnacle was red with blood, and the earth beneath was piled with smashed bodies more than a hundred deep. They died by the tens of thousands that night, and you can see their broken bones piled like snow drifted against an oak at the base of Lynortis. Lynortis cost Masale his

empire, but Masale made Lynortis pay with its life.

"Who can say who won the war? Who can number the dead here? Masale left the field a graveyard, and the bones of two nations bleach unburied here amidst the ruins of war. And they don't rest easy, my friend--take the word of a man who's lived through it all."

Laddos cursed him and gnawed at the stringy meat. His gaze wandered to the bolted door.

"You've lived here ever since?" Kane asked. "Why?"

The scarecrow figure gestured weakly. "Where else to go? The woman and I served the master before Masale swept upon us. No one kills the servants. For a space Masale himself made this house his quarters, but when the trebuchets found the range, he moved back. Sometimes his generals quartered here, sometimes his surgeons worked over bodies too broken to fight again. We served them all. And when the missiles fell about the house, we hid in the cellar until it stopped for a while, and when we crawled out we'd find our masters buried beneath the walls and ceilings, and then new masters would come.

"We hid the night Lynortis fell, and when Masale marched his broken army away there were no more masters. Where else to go? Who else to serve? We remained here in the wreckage with a few others who survived, lived off what we could scavenge, and shivered through nights when the ghouls and ghosts marched around the manor and pounded at our door..."

From somewhere in the cellars beneath them, a dog began to bark frantically. Laddos and Kane exchanged glances.

"A rat," explained Hranal, as the two men started to their feet. "He likes to chase them."

The dog yelped in pain, howled in sudden fear. The sound rolled eerily through the ruined halls beyond

"Big rat," observed Kane, wiping grease from his hands. He headed for the cellar.

"I'll just come with you," Laddos decided.

"Thought Jeresen said to watch the old man."

The Waldann's broken nose jutted truculently. "Hell, they ain't going nowhere. I want to see what scared that dog."

The cellar beneath the kitchen was clean and well kept. Shelves of wine bottles and foodstuffs were neatly ordered along the walls. One end was curtained off, and behind was a small bed and plain furnishings, a broken mirror and a few items of woman's clothing laid over an old trunk. Sesi's quarters, guessed Kane. The others slept upstairs.

A heavy door opened into the cellars beneath the main house. The door was ajar.

"This been open?" asked Kane.

"How should I know?" Laddos shrugged, edging the lantern into the room.

The floor of the gutted halls overhead had been broken through by falling stones. Sections had caved in under the weight of rubble. A few stars could be seen through the jagged apertures. Dust and decay and broken walls. The ruin was complete.

"There'll be another cellar beneath the far wing," Kane surmised. "Probably at least one subcellar beneath this one. Over there, steps go down."

"Where?" Laddos raised the lantern, stepping cautiously around the shadowy piles of debris. "Gods, if there's a weak place in the floor here..."

Kane crossed to the steps that led below. "Something's disturbed the dust here."

"Jeresen searched the place pretty thorough when we got here. I don't hear that dog no more." Laddos kept glancing over his shoulder.

"Paw prints in the dust, too. Something else I can't figure--too blurred and blotchy." Kane started for the stairs.

"Let's forget it. The dog had a rat."

"Give me the lantern if you're going back."

Laddos swore and followed him down the narrow steps.

Something growled from below.

"Watch it!" Kane's blade wavered.

Laddos hurried with the light. Twin circles of fire glared at them. The dog was backed into a corner at the foot of the stairs. Hackles raised, fangs bared, tail between his legs in paralyzed terror. He didn't seem to see them until they reached the base of the steps--then he bolted between them and dashed madly off into the ruins above.

The two nervously surveyed the subcellar. Its ceiling had not given way, but the chamber was cluttered with mouldering debris of uncertain nature. In the lamplight Kane saw a skeleton still sprawled across a rotting pallet, both legs clipped off at mid-femur. A torture chamber or hospital; the distinction seemed meaningless, as he glanced over the cobweb-shrouded tables and implements, noted the dry bones asleep under blankets of dust. A gas bomb Kane guessed. It would have lingered for days in this low place'

"What's that?" Laddos hissed.

Something scurried crab-like away from the circle of lamplight. Kane had the impression of a misshapen spider the size of a hound. He started for it, but the creature scrambled agilely beneath a mound of overturned furnishings and vanished before he could get a good look at it. Something squat and shaggy, with a gait impossible to describe.

"There's a burrow here!" Pointed Laddos.

Kane nodded. He had seen one like it in the trench where Sesi had escaped. A cramped burrow through which an agile youth might wriggle, piercing the wall of the subcellar.

"Did Masale have trenchworks connected to the manor?" Laddos demanded.

"I don't know."

"Then what...?"

"I don't know."

A broken-legged chair toppled over with a crash from a mound of rubble close to the burrow. Laddos whirled with a curse--then dropped his sword and thrust his arm beneath an overturned table.

"Got you--you goddam bitch!" The mercenary yanked the snarling girl out from where she crouched, his arm gashed where her dagger had struck. He flung her sprawling onto the stones and kicked the blade from her hand.

"Hold her, Kane! Jeresen's going to--"

Laddos didn't finish. Kane caught the lantern from his nerveless hand as the mercenary sprawled forward.

Sesi stared without comprehension as Kane wiped the blood from his swordblade. Slowly she came to her feet--eyes on Kane as she straightened the torn edges of her short gown over her scratched and muddy thighs. "That's three times you've interceded, Kane. Whose hand do you play? Not Grey's; not Jeresen's. Is it Masale's?"

"I play Kane's hand," said Kane. "Does it matter?"

Sesi grimaced. "I suppose not--in the end."

"Don't edge any closer to that tunnel, or I'll pin foot to the floor," warned Kane.

Sesi halted her stealthy retreat. "What now? Do you call Jeresen?" Her voice was cool for the terror that shone in her eyes.

"Should I?"

Sesi glanced at Laddos's body. "So Kane means to share Lynortis's treasure with no one. What difference will it make to me?"

"You'll find me kinder than Jeresen. If this treasure exists, it's useless knowledge unless you have someone who can arrange to get both you and the gold out of this devil-haunted graveyard."

"Is that why you think I haven't made use of my secret before now?"

"There's some reason why you haven't. Could be you needed time to think it out. The gold is useless to you here, but to get it out you'd need someone you could trust."

"Meaning you." Her voice was sarcastic.

"That's right."

"Suppose I told you I didn't know of any secret treasure?"

Kane shrugged. "It might be. But the story the old folks tell of your mother's coming here corroborates Jeresen's account. Was Reallis your mother?"

"She was--but that doesn't prove she told me of any hidden treasure."

"You'll never prove that to Jeresen."

Her shoulders sagged. "I know. Or to anyone."

She stood a moment slumped in despair, her lips pressed tight. Kane wondered that she had no tears. Then her hands caught the hem of her shift. With a quick movement she pulled the gown over her head and tossed it to the floor. Her tousled brunette mane and her defiance were all that clothed her. Her flesh was a warm tan, her breasts high and proud. The dirt that smeared her lithe limbs and piquant face was a contrast to the clean lines of her hips and torso.

"This is all I have to give you, Kane. Whether you believe that or not, you're the only hope I have. Get me out of this, and I'll give to you the only thing I can offer."

Not original, and nothing he couldn't take by force, but Kane liked the set of her jaw as much as he approved the rest.

"All right," he said. "We'll take this up again later. Right now there's Jeresen to think about. How'd you get back here?"

Sesi slithered into her ragged shift. "I grew up here; I know the battlefield well. When I led Jeresen to the trenches I thought it would either be a chance to escape or a quick death. When you cut my halter, I dove into the tunnel at the end of the trench. When you have to, you can wriggle pretty fast, even with your hands tied. I came out in the brush farther down, slipped away in the darkness and crept back here through the ruined wing. I thought Jeresen wouldn't think to search here again."

"Your hands were tied? What killed Bonaec?"

Sesi started. "Was that the scream? It must have been one of the half-men. There was one in here just before you came down. I was afraid to move or cry out, with Jeresen's men upstairs. I don't think they'd hurt me, but they terrify me."

"Half-men?" Kane remembered the misshapen crab-like skulker.

"They live in the ruins of Lynortis--the other survivors of the battle. They don't like to be seen."

It was time to get away, Kane decided. Jeresen might swing back to the manor at any minute, and it would not be good for them to be here.

"We'll slip out the way you came in," Kane told her. "Let Jeresen puzzle it out. If we can hide in Lynortis, Masale and Jeresen can fight it out while we make our break."

Sesi nodded. "This way, then." Kane followed her back up the stairs and into the night outside.

Behind them in the darkness there were scurrying, scraping sounds from the burrow.

V

Hunters in the Night

"How much of what Jeresen said was true?" Kane asked. They were close to the summit, and Kane judged it safe to rest for a moment. In the darkness it had been easy to steal across the battleground, although twice the search had come close. Once on the spiral road, the danger increased. Horses had passed this way, and if they encountered Jeresen's men here... On one side rose the sandstone cliff, on the other there was only emptiness. Nowhere to hide--it would have to be stand and fight.

"True? You're asking me?" Sesi was fighting for breath. She leaned against the

low wall of the road's outer edge, watching the shifting torchlight far below. Jeresen had spread his men out as best he could. In places huge bonfires served as beacons to guide their search. It was a desperate search, even for that many men--but Jeresen had no choice.

Kane moved beside her, studying the lights below. They had crept through the tangled wreckage of the battlefield not daring to show the lantern. Sesi wondered time and again as Kane uncannily avoided unseen obstacles and pitfalls that even with her familiarity with the field she would have blundered into. When she realized her companion could see in the dark, she almost turned and fled. But Kane, enigmatic and menacing, was her one uncertain hope.

Kane was speaking. "I mean about someone overhearing your mother tell you about the treasure and going to Masale with that knowledge."

Sesi tried to see his face in the darkness. "That would have been Amenit. Drifters pass through from time to time--drifters like yourself, if that much is true about you. If you don't mind stealing from the dead--and Amenit didn't--there are many dead here. Mother never was very strong; she died a month ago. Before she died we talked of things. Several nights later, Amenit was drunk. He crept in and tried to force himself upon me. Orsis beat him rather badly, and the next morning Amenit was gone. Poor Orsis--he was a protector for us both. Jeresen had to kill him."

"And you say Reallis never spoke to you of treasure?"

"Not a word. You have to believe me, Kane!"

Kane shrugged. "Something doesn't add up, I'll grant you. But we need to reach Lynortis. Got your wind back?"

The once imposing gates of Lynortis had been torn from their hinges and the bronze doors thrown from the summit, after the city had fallen from within. The citadel's dark streets were blocked with rabble. The skyline was one of foreshortened horizons, broken towers, gutted buildings, and fire-blackened walls.

Kane paused at the empty gateway, peering across the open plaza beyond. Sesi pressed close against his massive body. "Almost no one ever comes up here," she whispered. "And never at night. Only the half-men."

"I thought I saw something move over across there," Kane murmured, straining to see. Sesi could discern nothing but thick shadow.

"The half-men are other survivors?" he asked. "How many are there?"

"I don't know. There aren't many of them left. I've seen some of them creeping about the battlefield at night. They never tried to hurt me, but I never waited to find out."

Kane frowned uneasily. "I don't like this--but we've got to reach cover. Let's try it." He started across the open plaza for the shadowy streets beyond.

"Here she is!" bawled someone from the darkness. A blurred figure stirred from the wreckage of a petrary. "Kane's got her! Here!"

Kane snarled and threw his knife at the onrushing Waldann. The man cried out and pitched backward from the force of his throw. Kane retrieved the heavy dagger from the mercenary's chest as he dashed past. But the damage had been done.

Hooves and boots stamped across the plaza at the shout--indistinct shapes rushing toward them. A torch flared to life, another. Jeresen had posted men to guard the entrance to Lynortis. The Waldanns closed in on the fugitives like wolves for the kill--how many, Kane couldn't tell. It was enough.

Kane cursed his luck and broke into a run. If he could cut through the first to reach them, he and the girl stood a chance of losing the others in the chaotic ruins of the city.

Halfway to the safety of the rubble-strewn streets, Sesi cried out and fell headlong across the stones. Kane spun about to help her. She writhed in pain, clutching her leg.

"Kane! My knee! It's broken!"

Kane hauled the girl to her feet. Sesi gasped as her injured leg buckled. He'd have to carry her. And they wouldn't make it.

"Kane! Go on!" Sesi hissed, trying to crawl for the shelter she'd never reach. But now it was too late for Kane to get clear. The first horsemen were upon them, hooves striking sparks as they drew rein.

They weren't certain about Kane in the initial surprise. Kane's knife caught one rider in the throat, spilling him from the saddle. His horse broke away as Kane lunged for its reins. The other mercenary reacted instantly, taking Kane's swordstroke across his buckler. He yelled out a warning and slashed down at Kane's face. Kane parried, at disadvantage against a mounted foe. The horseman did not press his attack--waiting for the others to close in. It was hopeless, and Kane knew it. In seconds they would ring him with steel. In the open he had no chance against mounted veterans; if he broke for cover they would ride him down. It would be good sport for them, but a game quickly finished. Sesi was tugging Kane's knife from the fallen mercenary, whether for defense or a quick death, Kane had no time to speculate. The circle had closed.

Angry faces snarled down at him as the horsemen pressed in. Kane parried one blow, hamstringed the horse as it bolted past. Its rider died as he fell. That made the others more cautious. Their prey was certain, but the first to reach him would die. For a heartbeat they milled about, each waiting for someone else to rush in.

Another horse screamed and fell, hamstringed from behind. Its rider vaulted clear, landed heavily. Steel flashed low to the ground and the mercenary's head rolled free.

The man nearest swung his torch. In its flaring light something spider-like scuttled back into the shadow. It was a man--or half of a man. He ran on his hands, legless torso swinging between his thickly muscled arms. He clutched a heavy knife in his teeth; there was blood on its blade.

Then an arrow sprouted from the torchbearer's chest. The link dropped from his hand, struck the stones, and went out.

Kane lunged for the horseman nearest him. Stunned, the Waldann remembered his shield an instant too late. Kane's upward thrust disembowelled him.

Another scream of pain from the darkness. Kane caught a glimpse of a mercenary on foot being dragged down by a twisted shape that rose from the darkness of a fallen wall.

"Down!" a bass voice yelled.

Kane dropped as a springald snapped. A wooden shaft as thick as his arm drove its iron head through the mail of the Waldann opposite him, scarcely slowing as it lifted the man from his saddle and carried him back into the darkness. Another arrow hissed past, and the remaining torch was smothered beneath its bearer's toppling body. In the darkness another man shrieked, more in terror than pain; his second outcry was cut short.

Two horsemen remained. Kane went for them, but they had had enough. They bolted past him, driving for the gate. One of the riders made it. His hoofbeats clattered for a long while up the winding roadway.

Kane could still hear their echo as the half-men gathered about them.

VI

In the Temple of Peace

On the ground a fallen torch snapped and flickered to life, spreading a pool of wan yellow light. Sesi shivered against Kane's arm, leaning heavily on it for support. The sword in Kane's left hand was poised to strike.

"Get the torch," he grated.

Sesi hopped quickly to the sputtering link, scrambled back to Kane. Her leg was badly lamed, but she was able to limp. Kane judged her knee had not been

broken, only wrenched and numbed by her fall.

"You can put down your sword," said a voice from beyond the ring of light.

"We're allies, it seems."

The speaker stepped into the light. Kane thought for an instant it was a two-headed hunchback. The figure came closer and Kane saw it was one man carrying another--or part of another man. Walking toward him was a tall, heavily muscled man, who appeared quite normal except for the eyeless mass of scar that was his face. Over his shoulder peered the head of the other man--a limbless torso slung in a harness to the blind man's back.

"Stop here, Semoth," he spoke in his bearer's ear. "We've saved their lives, but they're still not certain we are allies."

Behind the blind giant scampered the man without legs, his knife sheathed in a sling behind his neck. No, this man was beardless; the one Kane had glimpsed earlier was shaggy as a bear. Another man stepped toward them--the archer, from his bow and quiver. His face and arms were misshapen knots of burned scar, though an upflung arm had spared his eyes from the spewing phosphorus. Another man joined them. Kane thought him a dwarf, but he had not been born with wooden clogs on the stumps of his thighs, or a steel hook where his right arm should have been. Others moved about in the shadow--maimed, twisted things whose misfortune had been not to die from the hideous wounds that had transformed men into freaks.

"We have overheard much," the limbless torso spoke. "It's easy to hide and watch when you're only half a man." Several others joined his mirthless laughter.

"Who are you?" Kane asked.

"I am Byr," said the torso. "In my other life I was Captain of the First Guard. Masale's soldiers left me for dead beneath a fallen wall, and gangrene did the rest. My friend Semoth commanded a trebuchet crew, until a chance stone struck the throwing arm as they were loading a phosphorus bomb.

"We all have similar stories as to who we were in past lives, and how we became creatures who must shun the sight of men. We are the creatures of war, the veterans for whom there was no victory, no spoils, no poems and parades. Our comrades who are past caring are the honored dead, while we who must live are the despised and pitied cripples. "

"You've lived here since the battle?"

"We have. Though we fought on opposite sides, the aftermath of war found us a nation of the maimed--united by our afflictions. And where would you have us live? When we returned to our homes, our wives and children cringed from us; our neighbors laughed and threw stones when we entered our old towns. How could we live? As beggars or as freaks to amuse the crowds? No, we chose to dwell in Lynortis, where no man ever comes--to live out our wretched lives in dignity where our fellows would not jeer and pity.

"And is it not better? Once we were men and enemies who hated and killed. Now we are half-men and comrades, and we live here in peace."

"Your peace has ended," Kane told him. "Jeresen will be up here in force in another hour."

"To all things must come an ending," Byr stated heavily. "It is the law of nature. Even to the war there was an ending, although I think there was no victor. The war was the ending for three hundred thousand. Tonight may be the ending for the handful who have survived."

"Masale is coming back to Lynortis."

"We know." Byr's smile was quiet, but not serene. "Masale is already here."

"Here! How can you know?"

"We watch where no man sees us," the legless man snickered. "In thirty years we know every hole and mound of rubble here. The Crawler saw Masale's scouts sneak in two hours ago. He told Glint," he nodded to an armless man, "and Ghot brought word to us."

Kane warily stepped past them. Sesi limping at his side, he climbed to the parapet and looked down. There were more torches now, many more. In places the motes of light rushed together; sometimes one winked out.

Semoth climbed after him, Byr guiding his blind steps. "Masale always was a good general," Byr commented without admiration. "He learned the Waldanns' position from his scouts, then encircled them in the dark--using no betraying light. They'll fight for a while between themselves, and at dawn those who are left will doubtless come to Lynortis."

"What will you do? They'll take Lynortis apart stone by stone looking for Sesi."

"We will not hide from them." Semoth spoke for the first time. "Sesi is our queen. Masale shall not have her."

"This is hardly a time for idealism," Kane protested. "The passage through the mountain is still open--Masale not have it guarded yet."

"Where would we flee?" asked the blind man.

"To all things there must be an ending," Byr repeated.

"You'll be butchered," Kane stated. "And aren't some you Masale's old soldiers?"

"That was in our other lives," Byr said calmly. "Now are outcasts--half-men. Lynortis is our home, and Sesi is our queen. Outcast and hunted, she shares in our suffering and Lynortis is her home. The war has not ended for us, nor has it ended for Masale. Now there will a final battle and a victor, for that which began thirty years ago must have an ending."

"You're all mad."

"Yes, we're all mad."

Kane swore in exasperation.

"Come with us to the Temple of Peace," Byr invited gently. "It may help you to understand."

Kane considered his chances of getting Sesi away from Lynortis. The roadway would certainly be guarded now, and Masale had brought more than a hundred men, by their torches. The outlook was grim. Lynortis was shelter for the moment, but Lynortis was also a trap.

Since there was nothing he could do for the moment, Kane followed the half-men to where they all now were going. Sesi limped painfully while holding his arm; she could walk, but without a horse they were not going to outrun any pursuit.

"This is the Temple of Peace?" Kane queried, as the half-men entered the featureless basalt monolith that squatted in an open court not far beyond the city's gate.

"It is now," Byr declared. "The old days, the old gods are no more--they died with Lynortis. We who survive worship a new god."

"The darklings...?"

"The darklings are no more--fled down into the nether regions from which they came, and only their burrows remain. A thousand screaming sacrifices were given to them, but their hell-spawned vials of killing vapor and searing phosphorus would not bring us victory. We rolled their poisons and fires back down into their burrows, and now we worship the god of Peace."

Nerves on edge, Kane followed the half-men past the wreckage of the temple doors and into the black stone temple. Its walls were stark and barren of any embellishment, drab and somber as an unmarked tomb. Once inside, the featureless walls were as claustrophobically oppressive as the inside of a sepulcher.

Within the sanctum several torches flared brightly. Here had once yawned an open pit into which uncounted sacrifices had been drawn down to Hell. Now the tunnel mouth was closed with great blocks of stone--an altar. And from the altar rose the statue of a man--a giant battle dress, sword upraised in fierce challenge. The statue's face had been obliterated.

"The Peacemaker!" intoned Byr.

"The Peacemaker!" echoed the others.

"Kane! What is it?" Sesi whispered anxiously, as Kane balked inside the sanctum.

"The Peacemaker--our god," Byr told her. "The bringer of peace."

"But that's the statue of a warrior!" Sesi protested.

"A special warrior!" Byr explained. "He is the man who led Masale's army up

through the passages of the mountain. His face is missing, for no man knows his face."

"You worship the man who betrayed Lynortis!" Sesi exploded in disbelief.

"We are soldiers from either side of that battle--and are we not equally maimed? The soldiers never win in any battle--only their leaders are victors. The soldiers fight and suffer; some live, some die--many like us don't quite die, but must live on as miserable human wreckage, while our leaders grow old in the luxury we suffered to win for them. Generals and princes live in glory, but the soldier dies in pain."

Byr's braids flew as he shook his head fiercely. "No, the Peacemaker did not betray us. He brought a swift end to two years of nightmare."

"But tens of thousands died because of him!"

"Tens of thousands died below, and died here. Who can say how many more would have died had the siege dragged on for two more years--for ten more years--with Yosahcora bartering wealth and souls for men and weapons, and Masale whipping thousands more of his subjects to add their bones to their brothers'?"

"The Peacemaker brought an end to this, and for this we give him thanks."

Byr's face was calm, for all the hate and anger of his words. "But now we shall worship for what may be a final time. Take me to the altar, Semoth."

The blind man obeyed. The burned archer helped him with the harness and Semoth carefully propped Byr's limbless trunk at the foot of the statue.

"Hail to the Peacemaker!" Byr's bass voice intoned. The assembled half-men echoed his chant.

"Hail to the Bringer of Peace!"

"Hail to the Bringer of Death!"

"Hail to the Bringer of the End!"

"Bring to us now an Ending!"

Kane grabbed Sesi's arm and steered her out of the Temple of Peace.

There may be a way out. We can make a break while the half-men engage Masale. It may draw men away from the passage through the mountain. Masale will be confident and attack up the roadway."

"Kane, I can't run any more," Sesi said wearily.

"You sure as hell can't wait here!"

"Does it matter? If Masale defeats them, he'll hound me wherever I run."

"If I can get us out of his lands, he'll never find our trail."

Sesi glanced at her swollen knee. "We'd never make it. You know that. It's me they all want. You can get away by yourself."

"I can try it with us both."

"It's hopeless. My best chance is to stay here with the half-men. If they can drive back Masale--"

"Sesi, they aren't going to defeat Masale! They're too few, too old, too crippled--and they're mad! You are, too, if you don't come with me."

"Stay and fight with them."

"Dead I can't spend that gold."

Sesi bit her lip. "Kane, damn you--there isn't any I gold!"

Kane stared at her without expression.

"If I knew the secret of a hidden treasure room, do you think I'd be in this wretched situation?"

"You might--if you hadn't had time to figure out how to make use of that knowledge. You couldn't just pick up a chest of gold and go walking off to the nearest city."

"Kane, my life hasn't been much, but I want to keep living, and I can't stand pain. Jeresen could have had the secret on his terms--if I only knew it."

"We've been over this, Sesi. Someone's lying somewhere."

"I don't know what Amenit made out of what he heard. I think he liked to sneak around and watch me undress--he jammed the bolt and came into my room through the main cellar the night Orsis beat him and drove him away. Mother was out of her head as the fever got worse. She talked a lot about her girlhood in Lynortis. Not much of it made sense. Several times she tried to tell me about

a room filled with gold, where she'd taken her own necklace to add to the pile. But she never said where it was or what it was all about. Kane, she wasn't ten when Lynortis fell!"

"Is that the truth?" Kane asked finally.

"Damn you, Kane! Of course it is! I've wanted to tell everyone this from the start! Only everyone knew I was lying when I wouldn't say what they wanted to hear."

Kane seemed lost in thought. Sesi could not read the feelings in his face.

"Look," she pressed him. "If I knew the secret of the treasure, I'd tell you before I'll tell those who have hounded me. You've done all in your power for me--I'd tell you now. No, I'd hold the secret over your head to make you throw your life away against Masale's attack. Kane, believe me--I don't know the secret of any hidden treasure!"

"I believe you," said Kane softly. "Masale won't."

Sesi shuddered and clung to him. "When Jeresen's men surrounded us on the plaza, I got your dagger. I thought I wouldn't let them take me, but I don't think I could have done it. I don't want to die, Kane."

"For all things there must be an ending," croaked a grotesque voice from the shadows.

Sesi screamed. Kane whirled in the direction of the voice.

The creature on the stones had once been a man--though it took imagination to recognize that. He had no more legs than Byr but enough of his arms remained to make stubby flippers. Wrapped in a shaggy fur sack, he scooted over the stones like a seal. His jaws had been torn away, and in answer to some morbid whim he had had the broken mandibles fitted with snoutlike jaws of razor-fanged steel. There was blood on the polished fangs.

"The Crawler is back!" shouted the armless man called Ghost. He ran out of the temple to help the steel-jawed amputee--pushing him with his foot as the Crawler rolled up the low steps.

The other half-men emerged from the sanctum. "What is it, Crawler?" Byr demanded.

"The roadway is guarded, but they never saw me," the Crawler announced in his barely intelligible voice. "I came as fast as I could ' but they'll be here any minute. Jeresen and Masale agreed to a truce after only a skirmish. Word came down of our presence here from one of Jeresen's men you let get away. He was scared out of his wits--enough to convince them. Jeresen and Masale had a council, and when I left Masale was arguing final terms to hire Jeresen and his mercenaries to help him storm Lynortis. Instead of fighting it out, they're going to attack together!"

Byr yelled frantic orders. The half-men rushed about to prepare their defense.

"That does it," Kane said grimly. "Let's try to get out of this."

"Kane, I meant what I said. I'm staying with them."

There was that set to her jaw he admired. Kane shrugged. "All right, then. I'm not."

Sesi started to call out to him as he turned. The words would not come.

VII

Echoes

Kane leaned against the merlon of a deserted bartizan atop the fortress wall. At a distance much farther down, the half-men were preparing to defend the broken portals of Lynortis. In the darkness he could only glimpse vague shapes scurrying around the plaza before the barbican. Below he could see the line of torches writhing like a serpent up the spiral road to the citadel.

He knew he should be going, finding cover until this was over, until there was

a chance for escape. Kane cursed the girl's stubbornness. He might have been able to win free with her. By himself he was confident of escape; Sesi was the only one they wanted--to lead them to a treasure she could never find. Kane regretted her loss. But this way was best. He'd have taken any risk for the secret of treasure, but one piece of gold would buy a bedmate more accomplished than Sesi. He should be going.

From the distance echoed a clashing roar. Kane knew the sound. Boulders hurled down the steep grade of the roadway. He could vaguely make out struggling knots of half-men rolling the huge stones onto the road--like ants swarming over a beetle. Once started down the slope, boulders plummeted downward with gathering speed--striking sparks as they caromed from the face of the mountain, glancing from the outer wall with sharp thunder. There was no room to avoid their avalanche for those on the roadway.

But Masale had endured two years of countless attacks and counterattacks along this bloodstained road--and he knew to expect resistance from the ruined citadel. Like phantom echoes through the night came the shouts of men, the splintering crash of falling boulders--then the brazen clangour of stone against armor. Masale advanced behind a mantlet hastily pieced together from relics strewn over the field below.

Men yelled, horses screamed as the avalanche of boulders struck the armored framework of the mantlet. Kane could see nothing of what took place on the road. Listening to the cries and crashes, watching the torchlit line waver and fall back, seeing rows of torches suddenly snuff out and fall spinning into the night, he could envision the chaos below. Rocks bounded over the wall to plummet down upon those on the tier below. Boulders smashed into the advancing mantlet, splintering hastily repaired timbers, flinging shards of stone and broken armor over those who crouched behind. And when the rumble of the rockslide echoed away, the line of torches continued its advance.

Masale's troops were closer now. Kane heard the clatter of hooves, the roar of warcries. Then the creak of ancient siege machinery. The springald smacked viciously, and Kane knew its heavy bolt was arching downward. He heard the rasp and recoil of an onager, flinging its basket of fist-sized stones.

Against one torchlit barbican he saw an archer firing into the advancing line. More stones rattled down the slope from the mangonel on the opposite barbican. Frantically the half-men worked over the few light siege weapons they could bring to bear at this close range. Masale's column pressed inexorably upward, although time and again sections of torches were swept away to oblivion. Kane felt admiration for the half-men's determination--a handful of cripples fighting with a few pieces of outworn weaponry. Given enough men and weapons to defend the entire perimeter of Lynortis, Masale would never have a chance.

As it was, the half-men were forced to concentrate all their defense on the section of the mountain directly below the gateway. Thus, as they advanced upward on the spiral road, only a fraction of Masale's troops came under attack at one time. There was no stopping his ascent to the open portal.

Now they were within a hundred yards of the gateway, and Kane could make out white smears of faces in the flaring torchlight. The smashed mantlet had been discarded, and they advanced in testudo formation--foot men in the van, mounted farther back. In minutes the van would force past the empty gates, and the horsemen would sweep through to annihilate all in the plaza. Arrows and rocks still rained on upraised shields; a springald bolt tore a path through their ranks. But now they advanced at a run, and Masale's archers were raining death amidst the city's defenders.

Farther back across the plaza a scorpion recoiled with a deadly slam--the heaviest siege engine Kane had noticed that was still operational. Daylight suddenly burst over the steep slopes before the citadel's gates. Kane threw up his arm, dazzled by the white-hot blast. A phosphorus bomb--the half-men had uncovered an unexploded shell somewhere. Spewing tentacles of incandescent death blossomed over the roadway. Where it struck men flamed into cinder. Searing fragments reached out like lethal fingers, burning all they touched. Men and horses shrieked in pain and terror, bolted over the outer wall in

blind panic. Flaming bodies pitched over the edge, falling like stars into the darkness far below.

The advance was broken. The scorpion bucked again, and another phosphorus bomb spread searing hell across the slope farther down. Masale's troops milled in terror. Another few bombs and their assault would be routed.

The scorpion lashed out a third time, but Kane saw no sunburst below. Far at the end of Masale's column, a score of torches were snuffed out. From cries in the night below, Kane guessed that a gas shell had struck there--too far down hill for the heavy vapor to have reached the main force.

Masale's troops were disciplined. Death before and beside them, they regrouped in the shelter of the far side, beyond the range of the defenders. Again they advanced--now in a headlong rush over the blackened bodies of their fellows. The half-men waited with their last shell until the first Masale's troops burst past the open portal. The phosphorus bomb exploded full in their ranks--turning the gateway into a screaming hell of death.

For a moment the gateway was blocked with charred writhing bodies. Then the rest of the column surged over the fuming barrier, carrying the battle to Lynortis's last defenders. The phosphorus flames died, and darkness swallowed the final battle.

But Kane no longer watched the death struggle before Lynortis's gates. He stood frozen, looking out over the crenel, his eyes seeing a battle of three decades past.

He saw Lynortis before the fall--ten thousand men defending its walls against ten thousand more who struggled up the road to reach the citadel above them. He saw a hundred siege engines fire at once, hurling death down upon those below. The night was alight with starbursts of phosphorus flaming across the forests thousands of feet below. And from the attackers arched missiles and stones to smash through the towers of Lynortis and crush those who could not hide.

Nowhere was there a place to hide.

Fire raged across the city where flaming balls of pitch and naphtha splashed. In the valley below, lethal clouds of black vapor drifted, slaying all in their breath. Women and children fought in the streets for the pitiable rations of food and water that were spared them. Plague stalked them all, in the valley and on the pinnacle. And the cries of the maimed and the dying were as a ceaseless moan of wind.

On and ever on the nightmare continued, while days of horror merged with nights of terror like the flapping of batwings. Death glutted himself here, taxing even death's insatiable greed, and the breath of corruption was scented with the acrid perfume of burning. In high Lynortis and on the plain below, hundreds of thousands died in fear and violence, and death was the only peace in this endlessly vision of hell.

At last all was quiet. The flames, the cries were no more. A dead city looked over a dead valley, where only those moved who sated themselves among the endless rows and piles and pits and mountains of the dead.

Kane could see the dead stirring now. See the smashed and burned and torn and fever-pocked and famine-eroded bodies rise from the moraine of unnumbered bones. See their spectral hordes march across the war-blasted forest rise from the talus of broken bones below, drift through the shattered towers and rubble-choked streets, dance a writhing spiral about the obelisk of Lynortis. Kane moaned and shook himself awake from his trance. He stared about him in a daze. The night was still, close and cold in the darkest hour before dawn. The battle was over, then. Masale's men had overrun the last defense. It was time to be going.

The Bringer of Peace

Kane moved like a ghost through the empty streets of Lynortis. His stealth was needless; there were none to bid him halt. The gates of Lynortis were guarded only by the slain. His path to escape was open, but Kane paused on the threshold.

The half-men had fought well, and in the end had died well. Masale had lost heavily on the assault up the roadway; scores more lay dead upon the stones of the plaza. With nothing to live for, the half-men had slain without fear for their lives. The price of Masale's victory had been costly, and from the strewn corpses of both his soldiers and the mercenaries not many had won past the plaza.

The Crawler lay smashed like a slug, his ghastly steel jaws still clamped in a throat. The blind giant Semoth sprawled with his face over a heap of Masale's soldiers. The others were there, too. Kane didn't see Byr at first, until he heard his name whispered.

Kane turned. A heavy bolt from the springald had been rammed butt-first into a mound of rubble. The leader of the half-men was impaled on its iron head.

"No! Don't touch me!" Byr warned him when Kane wanted to lift him free. "I'm bleeding inside. Only have a few breaths left to me."

Kane stood back and gazed at the carnage.

"So you came back," Byr said.

Kane studied his drawn face and knew what the man meant. "So you know me, then."

"I know you. None of us ever knew for certain, but I guessed."

"You fought well here."

"Not well enough. Masale and the Waldann captain fought past, with maybe ten or fifteen of their men. They have Sesi."

"I'm sorry for that."

"Why, Kane?" Byr whispered "Was it for gold?"

Kane shrugged, his face hidden in shadow. "The gold had long ago been spent--even Reallis's necklace. I grew tired of the senseless slaughter... I wanted it to end."

Byr coughed a frothy beard of blood. "For me it ends now. But the war that has festered here for thirty years still goes on. Kane, bring to us now an Ending."

He lived just long enough to see Kane walk past him, away from the open gateway.

A pair of guards lounged at the entrance to the Temple Of Peace. They mistook Kane for a Waldann straggler until it was too late. Kane let their bodies fall quietly, then walked into the torchlit sanctum.

Sesi hung naked from an overhead support--a dozen merciless faces intent on her. Her wrists were tied behind her back, and her arms drawn over her head by a rope thrown over the roof support. When the full weight of her body pulled down, the agony was excruciating and in time her shoulders would be torn from their sockets. A second rope made a noose about her throat, slowly strangling her whenever the rope that held her wrists was allowed to go slack. Her tanned flesh was crisscrossed with livid welts.

Jeresen was drawing up the slack on her bound wrists when Kane entered. One of Masale's men was carefully paring resinous splinters from a torch. Sesi stared down at Kane through pain-glazed eyes.

The Waldann captain was first to see him. His face twisted into a sneer. "You got balls coming back now, Kane! I know all about how you tried to steal this little bitch for yourself."

Masale started at his words. He spun and stared at Kane in wonder. "You!" he shouted.

"That's right." Kane smiled coldly.

The would-be conqueror touched his scarred and lined locks of hair. His hooked nose had always made him look like an eagle, but he was an old and tired eagle now. His eyes were rimmed and haunted; his warrior's body showed the effects of dissipation beneath his splendid mail.

Masale shook his head in disbelief. "You amaze me, Kane. After thirty years you stand before me once again--yet on my oath, you haven't aged a year since that night you disappeared after leading me through the mountain passage into Lynortis!"

"By the Seven, that fits with some of the tales I heard about Kane when we fought together under Roderic!" Jeresen growled. "Some whispered he was a sorcerer--or demon--a deathless bringer of doom whose name figures in a hundred legends! Kill him I say!"

"I give orders here!" Massie snarled. "Kane has served me well in the past. If he serves me again, he'll share in the gold."

The legendary warrior-king considered the red-bearded giant with the uncanny eyes. Masale had never cared to look into Kane's eyes. He liked it even less just now. "Well, Kane. Have you come to share in the gold?"

"You've chased a shadow," Kane laughed. "Sesi knows of no gold. "

"We have plenty of time to question her," Masale stated. "If you don't think she knows of hidden treasure, why then have you come back?"

"Because to all things must come an ending, Masale--even to this war. And you have no time left."

Masale sensed his meaning, but already Kane's left hand had found his sword. Masale bellows a warning and its echo floats on the air. Seconds of time move dreamlike, for they are final seconds--all that happens in that instant before the brain knows that it is dead is like the passage of a lifetime.

Jeresen has dropped the strappado rope. Sesi's wrists fall to her back, and the noose closes on her throat. The crossbow--cocked and ready--Jeresen reaches for it. Kane's right hand flicks out--there's a knife--glittering across the room--through Jeresen's eye.

And Kane's sword lifts clear of his shoulder scabbard. His fingers have just touched its hilt, but its blade continues its outward arc. A soldier sees his belly spilled open, his comrade's hand spinning in the air. There is a ribbon of crimson, and Kane's blade is still moving.

Now behind Kane--they rush him. His blade turns to meet them. A Waldann head lifts into the air along with the falling hand, His companion takes the swordpoint through his heart.

Kane pulls his blade free--his right hand catches the dead man's fallen sword. Kane whirls. He has a sword in each hand. In his powerful grasp they are no more than knives to him. Kane's twin blades carve flashing scarlet runes--parry and thrust--slash, parry and thrust. Attack, Kane--you've no time to defend. His forearm is bleeding--there's a gash across his side. Five more lives lie sprawled at Kane's feet.

All together they're on him now. No wall for Kane's back. They're trying to circle. Rush in and be next to die--will it be you? Another man dies. The man with the axe--try to block its swing. Kane's right hand holds a broken sword--the axe-wielder holds an armload of his entrails. From the right flashes a spear, goring Kane's thigh. Kane staggers--hurls the broken sword at the spear thrower's face. Jagged steel zips his eyes--the spearman never sees the swordblow that cleaves through his ribs.

They fall away now. Fear twists cruel faces for perhaps the first time. Kane seizes another blade in his bleeding right hand. A blond skull is split open, a leg is but a stump--and now the last few would flee. One dies with Kane's steel through his back--the other can only stumble to the door before the blood spurting from where his arm was is suddenly a trickle.

Masale stands alone now, face livid with rage. For Masale there has never been retreat, and he thinks only to slay this gore-splattered demon who has wreaked carnage among his men. He lunges for Kane, his blade a blue flicker. Kane moves faster, his blade faster still. Masale knows fear--then he knows nothing more.

And the echo of Masale's warning floats away into the night.

Kane stood reeling on the crimson-splashed stones. About him were only the dead and the dying. He glowered through the red haze of killing lust that throbbled through his huge frame. There were no more to kill. It was over. Sesi's nude figure writhed at the end of the strangling noose. Her neck had not snapped, since there had been no drop, but her face was turning dark from the throttling coil.

Kane lunged quickly. His blade flashed above her head. The rope snapped like a bowstring, and Sesi's limp body tumbled into his arms.

He removed the noose and cut the rope at her wrists. Sesi lay weakly in his arms, gasping for breath. She moaned when he touched her bruised, bleeding flesh, but there were still no tears.

"There are horses for the taking," Kane told her, wrapping a cloak about her shoulders. It was cold just before dawn. "We'll stop to pick up whatever you want to take with you. The war is finally over here."

"Who won the war, Kane?"

"I did."

"You didn't win a thing, Kane. You only survived."

"It means the same thing."

"But there must be more to victory than just survival."

Kane nodded to the fallen as he carried her from the temple. "Ask them now. Ask me in a hundred years."