

The Other One  
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There is a story, so it is told, of certain bandits who took shelter beneath a tree, and as the darkness and the storm closed over them, they gathered about their fire and said to their leader: "Tell us a tale, to pass the night hours in this lonely place;" and their leader spoke to them: "Once certain bandits took shelter beneath a tree, and as the darkness and the storm closed over them, they gathered about their fire and said to their leader: "Tell us a tale, to pass the night hours in this lonely place; 'and their leader spoke to them: 'Once certain bandits took shelter beneath a tree...'"

Blacker against the darkening sky, the thousand-armed branches of the huge banyan swayed and soughed before the winds of the storm. Tentative spats of rain struck the barren stones beyond their shelter--streaking like the ranging shots of massed archers from the lowering thunderheads that marched toward them from across the desolate plain beyond.

Someone got a fire going. Yellow flames crackled and spat as the damp twigs caught; grey smoke crawled through the roof of banyan limbs to be whipped away by the winds. There were more than ten of them about the fire--outlaws and renegades whose dirty mail and mismatched weapons showed the proof of hard and bloody service.

Another hundred of them might have gathered beneath the banyan, pressed between its pillared maze of limbs and roots. The tree had spread its limbs and stabbed downward its roots, growing upward and outward for imperturbable centuries. Behind--along the trail the outlaws had followed--lay unbroken miles of tropical forest. Beyond--toward which their path led--stretched a miles-wide plain of utter desolation. Beneath the grey curtain of the approaching storm, could be glimpsed the walls of forest that enclosed the farther perimeters of the plain.

Across the jungle-girded plain, new forest crept through where a century before had been carefully tilled fields, crawled over flattened stones and heaps of broken rubble where once had reared a great city. Of the city, no walls or towers remained; so utter was its destruction that scarcely one stone yet stood upon its base. It was an expanse of total annihilation--a wasteland of toppled stone and fire-scarred rubble. After more than a century, only scrub and vine and secondary forest had invaded the ruin. More than another century would pass before the last mound of shattered wall would vanish beneath the conquering forest.

They gathered about their fire, laying aside their well-worn gear, pulling out such as they had to make their evening meal. Three days march, or maybe four--and their leader promised them more plunder than they in might carry. This night the prospects did not bring the usual chatter of anticipation. Uneasily, the men watched the closing storm, gloomily considered the plain of ruins beside which they were camped. For these were the ruins of Andalar the Accurst, and no man cared to linger in this place.

"The greatest city of the land," one of them murmured pensively. "Nothing now but broken stone and rotted bone. Not even pickings to tempt a vulture there now."

"Once there was pickings as rich as you'd dare dream," another commented. "Andalar was the proudest city in the world." "And the gods destroyed Andalar for its pride," a third intoned, with less scorn than had he spoken in another place than this. "Or so I've heard." "I've heard a number of tales," the first bandit argued. "No one seems to remember anymore." "I remember," their leader murmured. "Do you indeed know the tale of the doom that came to this city? Pray, tell us the tale." Their leader laughed, as at a bitter jest, and began.

The news of the death of Andalar's king came as no great surprise to Kane. Luisteren VII was late into his eighth decade. Nor was the news--at first--any tragic blow to Kane; for he had taken certain measures to insure that Andalar's ruler would never enter his ninth decade. Kane, as Lord Minister of Andalar, was well known to be a great favorite of the senile king's half-witted heir, and, although it was less well known, the king's youngest wife, Haeen, was a great favorite of Kane.

As the first shrill rumors of Luisteren's impending death sped through the palace, and the funeral trumpets of the priests of Inglarn howled a tocsin throughout the twilight streets of the city, Kane smiled, filled his golden chalice and drank a silent toast to the memory of the departed. The king's death had fallen several months earlier than his plans called for. Perhaps he should have administered the powders more conservatively, or possibly the aged despot's heart had simply choked in its dusty blood. Whatever, Luisteren VII was dead. Kane's position was secure. When the king's favorite son mounted the throne as Middosron III, the new king would be only too content for Kane to manage the affairs of Andalar as he pleased.

Kane finished the brandy, leaned his massive body back in his chair, and reflected upon the past year. It had been a heady rise to power, even by Kane's standards--but then, Andalar had been a prize ripe for the picking, and it mattered little to Kane that his course had been so formularized as to be tedious to him.

As captain of a band of mercenaries, Kane had entered Andalar's service not quite a year before. Success in battle had brought him to the king's attention, and his rise to general of the city-state's armies had quickly followed. Andalar's border wars victoriously concluded, Kane used the king's favor to advance to high office in the royal court. A judicious prescription of certain esoteric elixirs known to Kane restored the aged king's vigor and virility, assuring Kane's influence over Luisteren. After that, it was only a matter of cunning statecraft: after Kane's chief rivals were exposed (by Kane) to be conspiring against the king, Kane's rise to Lord Minister of the city-state was as inevitable as the king's imminent decease.

While it was hardly a novel situation for Kane, he did feel a certain pride of accomplishment in that never before had an outlander risen so fast or so far in Andalar's power structure. Andalar was the oldest and grandest of the scattered city-states that held suzerainty over this jungle-locked region, and if a pronounced obsession with traditions and a decided xenophobia accompanied that proud heritage, so had an incalculable fortune accumulated in the royal coffers over the centuries. Kane was amusing himself with idle schemes as to the use he would make of Andalar's bounty, when Haeen dashed into his chambers.

Luisteren's youngest wife had not a quarter of her royal husband's years. Haeen was slender, close to Kane's six feet of height--but neither boyish nor coltish. Her figure was as precisely formed as that of a marble goddess, and she moved with a dancer's poise--for she had once been a dancer in the temple of Inglarn. She had the rare combination of bright green eyes and hair of luminous black. At the moment her long hair was disordered, her elfin features bleak with despair. Kane wondered at her tears, for Haeen had shown no such

evidence of wifely devotion during their own clandestine trysts.

"You know?" she said, coming to his arms in a swirl of silks.

Kane wondered at the lifelessness of her tone. There was no need for such convention in his private chambers. "I was told he had lapsed deeper into stupor about dawn. When the priests started their damned caterwaul a moment ago, I drank to your widowhood."

Haeen made a choking sound beneath Kane's red beard, wrapped her arms about his barrel chest. "If only he could have withstood this last fever. We might have had so many more nights from which to steal an hour of ecstasy."

Kane laughed urbanely. "Well, of course propriety will dictate a judicious interval of mourning, but after..."

She stopped his laugh with her kiss. "One last embrace, beloved! They will be coming for us in another moment."

"What are you talking about?" Kane began, suddenly aware that her despair was all too real.

But already they had come for them.

Gaudy in their flame-hued cloaks, the priests of Inglarn filed into Kane's private chambers. Their faces were pallid beneath sooty ritual designs of mourning; their expressions were unreadable as they regarded the pair.

"Come, O Beloved of the King," intoned their leader. "Your master summons you to dwell with him now in the Palace of Inglarn in the Paradise of the Chosen."

"I left orders that I was not to be disturbed," Kane snarled, groping for understanding. His personal bodyguard--all handpicked men--should have thrown these fools from his threshold, given alarm had Kane's secret designs miscarried. But a glance beyond the doorway showed Kane's soldiers calmly withdrawing from their stations.

The contempt in his tone cut through the sonorous phrases of the high priest.

"You are an outlander, Lord Kane. You hold high office such as no stranger before has been entrusted. Yet, outlander that you are, there remains the final and highest duty that you must perform to your master."

Kane had newly come to this land, had only a sketchy impression of its innumerable laws and traditions. If they suspected poison, why had come priests instead of armed guards?

"What is this, Haeen?"

"Don't you know?" Haeen told him dully. "It is the Law of Inglarn. When the king of Andalar is summoned into Paradise, his household and his chief counselors must accompany him. Thus they will continue to serve their master in the Palace of Inglarn, and the new king will begin his holy reign untainted by the ties that the departed king had established."

"Of course," Kane agreed blandly, while behind his impassive face his thoughts were chaotic. His knowledge of this tradition-bound land was incomplete.

Inglarn was purely a local deity, and Kane had not troubled to learn the secrets of his cult. Luisteren VII had ascended the throne as a child, more than seventy years before. In his concern with court intrigue, Kane had not delved overmuch into events beyond the memory of almost everyone in the city.

"Come with us now to the temple of Inglarn," the high priest invited. His two fellows produced the ritual fetters of gold. "This night you will pay a final earthly court to your master upon his pyre. On the morrow you will pass through the flame to join him in the Blessed Palace of Inglarn."

"Of course," Kane smiled. Save for the priests, the hallway beyond his quarters was for the moment deserted. One does not intrude upon a sacred ritual.

The high priest's neck snapped with a sound no louder than his gasp of surprise. Kane flung his corpse aside as carelessly as a child discards a doll, and his open fist made lethal impact with the neck of the second priest, even as the man stood goggle-eyed in disbelief. The third priest spun for the open doorway, sucking breath to shout; Kane caught him with an easy bound, and steel-like fingers stifled outcry and life.

Haeen raised her voice in a shrill scream of horror.

It was not a time for reason. Kane's blow rocked her head back with almost

killing force. Pausing only to strap his sword across his back, Kane bundled the unconscious girl I in his cloak and fled like a shadow from the palace.

Darkness, and the initial chaos as news of the king's death stunned the city, made possible Kane's escape. That, and the fact that Kane's sacrilege was so unthinkable that the tradition-bound folk of Andalar at first could not react to so monstrous a crime.

Kane made the city gates before Haeen had fully recovered consciousness, and before knowledge of his outrage had alerted the confused guard at the wall. He would have ridden beyond Andalar's bourne before pursuit could be organized, but forest trails are treacherous in the night, and while Kane might see in the darkness, his horse could not.

Kane swore and sent his crippled horse stumbling off into the darkness. The false trail might throw off pursuit for long enough to let him make good his escape. Haeen still seemed to be in shock--either from his fist or from his sacrilege--but she followed him silently as Kane struck out on foot.

They walked for a timeless interval through clutching darkness--Kane holding his pace to Haeen's--until at last a taint of greyness began to erode the starless roof of trees.

There was muffled thunder of water somewhere ahead of them, and a breath of cold mist. In the greyness of false dawn, they crept toward the rim of a gorge. Kane slowed his pace, uncertain how to reach the river below. He had campaigned along the borders of the city-state's holdings, and had a fair idea as to his bearings, although he did not recognize this vicinity of the forest. Haeen huddled miserably on a boulder, watching as Kane prowled about along the mist-lapped escarpment.

"We'll find a way down once it's daylight," he told her. "There's rapids along here, but if we follow the river farther down, it flows smoothly enough to float a raft. We'll lash some drift together and float beyond Andalar's borders before the fools can guess where to search for us."

"Kane, Kane," Haeen moaned hopelessly. "You can't escape. You don't even know what sin you propose. Kane, this is wrong!"

He gave her an impatient scowl that--in the half-light--she could only sense from his tone. "Haeen, I have not lived this long to end my life in some priestly ritual. Let the fools burn the living with the dead, as tradition demands. You and I will laugh together in lands where Andalar is a realm unknown."

"Kane." She shook her midnight mane. "You don't understand. You're an outsider. You can't understand."

"I understand that your customs and sacred laws are sham and empty mummery. And I understand that I love you. And you love me."

"Oh, Kane." Haeen's face was tortured. "You scorn our laws. You scorn our gods. But this you must understand."

"Haeen, if you really want to die for the greater glory of a husband whose senile touch you loathed..."

"Kane!" Her cry tore across his sneer. "This is evil!"

"So is adultery in some social structures," Kane laughed, trying to break her mood.

"Will you listen to me! What you mock is a part of me."

"Of course."

"Andalar is the oldest city in the world."

"One of the wealthiest, I'll grant you--but far from the oldest."

"Kane! How can I make you understand, when Von only mock me!"

"I'm sorry. Please go on." Kane thought he could see a path that might lead downward, but the mist was too thick to be sure.

"Andalar was built by Inglarn in the dawn of the world." She seemed to recite a catechism.

"And Andalar worships Inglarn to this day," Kane prompted her. It was not uncommon to find local deities worshipped as the supreme god in isolated

regions such as this.

"When Inglarn departed in a Fountain of Flame to the Paradise Beyond the Sun," Haeen recited, "he left a portion of his sacred fire in the flesh of the kings of Andalar."

Kane had heard portions of the legend. But he had long since lost interest in the innumerable variations of the solar myth.

"Therefore," Haeen continued, "the personal household of each king of Andalar is sacred unto the fire of Inglarn. And when the Fire Made Flesh of the king transcends the Flesh and must return to the Fire of Inglarn, then so must all of those who are a part of the king's Radiance enter with their king into the Fire, to be reborn in the Paradise of the Chosen."

"There must be a way down to the river not far from here," Kane mused aloud.

"It might be best if I seek it out by myself, then come back for you."

"Kane, will you listen! This is the sin you have committed! You have defied the Sacred Law of Inglarn. You have sought to escape the fate that Inglarn has ordained for you. And the Law decrees that, should any of the king's household so blaspheme Inglarn as to flee from their holy duty to their king and their god, then shall Inglarn come back from the fire--return to utterly destroy Andalar and all its people!"

Kane sensed her agony, listened to her anguished phrases, tried to make himself understand. But Kane was a man who defied all gods, who knew no reverence to any god or law. And he knew that they must make good their escape within the next few hours, or be encircled by their frantic pursuers.

"I have heard such legends in a hundred lands," he told her carefully. But he now understood that the people of Andalar would spare no effort to capture them for the pyre.

"But this is my land."

"No longer. I'll take you to a thousand more."

"Only hold me for this moment."

And Kane took Haeen then, on the moss-robed boulders of the gorge--while the river rumbled beneath them, arid the skies tattered with grey above them. And Haeen cried out her joy to the dying stars, and Kane for an instant forgot the loneliness of immortality.

And after, Kane unbound their spent bodies, and kissed her. "Wait here until I return. You're safe--they'll need full light to find our trail. Before then I'll have found a path down to the river. We'll see the last of Andalar's borders and its mad customs before another dawn."

And she kissed him, and murmured.

It was late morning before Kane finally discovered a path into the gorge that he was confident Haeen could traverse. They could follow the river for a space--throwing off pursuit--until he could fashion a raft to carry them beyond Andalar's territories. While this avenue of escape was by no means as certain as Kane had given Haeen to believe, Kane knew their chances were better than even. Cautiously Kane retraced his steps to the boulders where he had hidden her.

At first Kane tried to tell himself that he had missed his landmarks, but then he found the message Haeen had scratched onto the boulder.

"I cannot let my city be destroyed through my sin. Go your own way, Kane. You are an outsider, and Inglarn will forgive."

Kane uttered a wordless snarl of pain, and turned his baleful gaze toward Andalar.

Kane followed her trail, recklessly, hoping that some fool might challenge his course, praying for a mount. He found where Haeen had met their pursuers, and where their horses turned to gallop back to Andalar.

But by the time he limped to within sight of the walls of Andalar, the funeral pyre of King Luisteren VII and all his household had blackened the skies...

The skies were black with night and the lowering storm, as their leader concluded his tale. Rain sought them through the massed banyan limbs, hissed into the fire. They looked upon the ruins of Andalar the Accurst, and shivered from more than the rain.

"But the legend then was true?" one bandit asked their leader. "Did Inglarn destroy the city because of the sacrilege the outlander had committed?"

"No. Their god spared their city," Kane told him bitterly. "But I returned with an army of a hundred thousand. And I spared not a soul, nor left one stone standing, in all of Andalar."