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Darkness Weaves

Karl Edward Wagner

To the memory of Toad Hall,

and the Toad Hall crowd,

and Toad Hall days.

I say to you againe, doe not call upp Any that you can not put downs; by the Which I means, Any that can in Turne call up somewhat against you, whereby your Powerfullest Devices may not be of use.

In their castle beyond night

Gather the Gods in Darkness,

With darkness to pattern man's fate.

The colors of darkness are no monotonous hue--

For the blackness of Evil knows various shades,

Full many as Evil has names.

Vengeance and Madness, inseparable twins,

Born together and worshipped as one;

Nor can the Gods tell one from his brother.

In their castle beyond night

Gather the Gods in Darkness;

And darkness weaves with many shades.

(Fragment attributed to Opyros)

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PART ONE

Prologue

"He's evil incarnate! Stay away from him!" Arbas glared at the young outlander across from him and took a deep drink from the mug of ale the stranger had bought him. At present he felt only contempt for the free-spending youth who had sought him out here in the Tavern of Selram Honest.

Arbas--called by many, Arbas the Assassin--was in a foul mood. A sudden and ill-timed (suspiciously ill-timed, it seemed to Arbas) run of bad luck with the dice earlier this evening had stripped from him a comfortable pile of winnings and all his ready coin as well. The adoring tavern maid, who had been slipping teasing fingers over the lean muscles beneath his leather vest, then turned coldly aloof and left him with a scornful air. Perhaps it was a disappointed air, Arbas mused sourly.

Then had come this stranger, whose upper-class manner was in dubious contrast to the rough dress he displayed. The stranger had simply introduced himself as Imel and volunteered no further information other than cautiously chosen gossip. Seemingly he was an altruist solely devoted to keeping Arbas's mug filled to the brim with strong ale. Unconvinced, Arbas decided to let the fool throw away his money. He was not a man who got drunk easily. Eventually Arbas knew that the other would in some very offhand, so very casual manner, begin to talk about some rival, some black hearted son of a bitch--someone for whose demise Imel would pay.

Arbas had been professionally estimating exactly how much Imel might be able to pay when the stranger had abruptly demolished all the assassin's calculations. Somehow the conversation had shifted to the one man whose death the Combine authorities so fervently prayed for. With a gait Arbas realized that the outlander was seeking information about Kane.

"Evil? But then, his character is not my concern. Anyway, I'm not searching the slums of Nostoblet to recruit a household treasurer. I simply wish to talk with him, is all--and I was told that you can tell me how to reach him." The stranger spoke the dialect of the Southern Lartroxian Combine with a burr that marked him a native of the island of Thovnos, capital of the Thovnosian Empire about five hundred miles to the southwest.

"Then you're a fool!" retorted Arbas and emptied his mug. Beneath his hood the stranger's thin face flushed with anger. Silently damning the assassin's impertinence, he signalled a passing tavern maid to refill Arbas's mug. Carelessly he tossed her three bronze coins from his purse, making certain that Arbas noticed its weight. The tavern maid did, and she brushed against Imel's shoulder as she poured, smiling as she swung away.

"Fickle bitch!" mused Arbas illogically, studying the crimson imprint of her rouged breast on the Thovnosian's gray cloak. The assassin slowly sipped his ale, but gave no indication he had noticed the almoner. "Someone talks too much for me. Too damn much! Who told you I could find him?"

He asked me not to give his name."

"Names, names, please mention no names. By Lato! You'll give me the name of that loose-tongued lying bastard who sent you to me--or you can go look for him in the Seventh Hell, where he damn well belongs! With that price on his head, there's not a handful of men in the Combine who'd not sell their souls for a chance to turn him in."

About them the tavern was bustling with activity. The cadaverous form of Selram Honest could be seen near the door to his wine cellar. A smile was etched through the grease of the gaunt proprietor's face as

he looked over the noisy crowd. Most were in a festive mood, loudly going about their pleasures, gambling, whoring, carousing. Boisterous thugs from the ill-lit streets of Nostoblet, reckless mercenaries in the dark green shirts and leather trousers of the Combine's cavalry, strange-accented wanderers passing through the city for unguessable purposes, seductively clad street tarts whose hard laughter never echoed in their too-wise eyes. Two blond mercenaries from Waldann were about to cast aside the bonds of long companionship and draw knives over some lethal quarrel intelligible only to themselves. A pretty-faced whore with curious scars spiraling each bright-rouged breast was expertly rifling the purse of the incautious seaman who embraced her. A balding, filthy onetime sergeant of the Nostoblet city guard was amusing several jeering rednecks with his whining plea for a drink.

Here and there small groups of men sat hunched over their tables in low whispers, hatching plans of which the city guard would give much to learn. But the city guard seldom ventured into the riverport alleys of Nostoblet except to collect bribes, and Selram Honest cared nothing for his guests' affairs, so long as they had money for his hospitality. Each man's business was his own. No one paid the least attention, therefore, to the hushed exchange that was taking place between Arbas the assassin and the stranger from Thovnos.

At least, no one with the possible exception of a one-eared soldier in nondescript harness, who had entered the Tavern of Selram Honest not long after Imel. The burly warrior's decrepit battle gear and glowering visage insured his solitude from enterprising whores or talkative drunks. On the hand that raised his alecup occasionally to his lips, there shone a carven silver ring set with a massive amethyst. The crystal flashed violet in the smoky yellow light of the tavern. But the silent man sat far across the crowded room from Arbas and Imel, well out of earshot. And if his gaze seemed too frequently turned in their direction, perhaps it was drawn by the dark-haired girl in multi-colored silks who danced upon the table somewhat beyond the two.

Imel remained in silent speculation for a moment, ignoring the smouldering anger in the assassin's dark face. This man was more difficult, more dangerous than he had at first judged him to be, and he was uncertain as to how deeply involved Arbas might be with his mission. At least for the present, he knew he must rely on the assassin. Diplomacy, then. Satisfy his suspicions, but tell him nothing important.

"Then it was Bindoff who sent me to you," said the stranger, smiling at Arbas's startled reaction on hearing the Black Priest's name. "Now have we a deal?"

Arbas's estimation of the Thovnosian underwent a radical change. He had half assumed the stranger was a bounty hunter and was considering a lonely spot for a knifing--but that he even knew of the Black Priest's connections with the man he sought was a telling point in his favor. Bindoff had guarded that secret with characteristic thoroughness. Perhaps, then, the man had in some inexplicable manner gained Bindoff's confidence. It might be worth the risk.

"Have you, say, twenty-five mesitsi gold [about two hundred dollars]?" Arbas asked casually. The stranger faked a hesitant pause--no merit in giving the assassin reason to think to ask for more. "I can raise it."

Arbas licked the foam from his mustache before replying. "All right, then. Bring it to me here two nights from tonight. I'll arrange for you to meet Kane."

"Why not tonight?" Imel urged.

"Not a chance, friend. Anyway, I guess I'll do me some checking on you before we go anywhere." Noting the stranger's annoyed impatience, Arbas quoted: "Happy in his folly, the fool embraced the

devil."

The stranger laughed. "Spare me the scriptures. What is there about this Kane, though, that gives him so evil a reputation? Surely one of your position is unjustified in casting aspersions on anyone."

But Arbas only chuckled and said, "Ask me again after you've met Kane!"

I

Those Who Dwell Within Tombs

Fed by cold springs and tiny streams of the high Myceum Mountains far to the east, the River Cotras cut its twisted path through miles of rocky foothills, until at last it reached the wide belt of lowlands that circled the Lartroxian coast. There it began its rush to the western seas--a fifty-mile stretch of deep navigable channel through fertile farmlands and rich forests. The city Nostoblet stood along the banks of the Cotras, where its waters first rushed from the low hills onto the coastal plains. By virtue of the wide river channel, Nostoblet was an inland port, receiving both exotic trade goods from the merchant ships that plied the western seas, as well as the wealth of the eastern mountains, brought down the roaring waterway on rafts by the half-wild mountaineers.

The hills behind Nostoblet were thinly forested and scarred by great outcroppings and canyons, where long ago mountain streams had slashed through the soft rock. Stone cliffs stood out in endless profusion, some rising hundreds of feet above the valleys below them. An almost uncrossable barrier, they guarded the plains of South Lartroxia, marking the limits where, as some scholars maintained, the ancient seas had once rolled.

The cliffs in the hills behind Nostoblet had been honeycombed with tombs in many places. The comparatively recent southern spread of the worship of Horment had instituted the custom of cremation of the dead. Consequently these tombs had been out of use for over a century now, and the paths that led to them had been unwatched by human guards for almost as long.

The people of old Nostoblet had always been a practical folk, whose religious habits had not required them to furnish lavish tombs for their dead. The custom of the wealthy in those days when the tombs were in use had been to lay their dead to rest in simple wooden boxes, which were set in niches within caverns that had been cut into the cliffs. None of the corpse's personal belongings were interred except the clothing he wore and occasional bits of jewelry of negligible value. (Consequently there was nothing to tempt a would-be graverobber to slip past the few soldiers who had guarded the tombs in the past--or

to brave the inhuman guardians. For the tombs of Nostoblet were infamous for ghouls and other worse dwellers, and the ghastly tales of their hauntings made all of Nostoblet scrupulously shun the area even to this time.

It was along the tortuous trails which ascended these cliffs that two men laboriously picked their way one stormy night. Lightning shattered the night's total blackness at frequent intervals, illuminating by its glare the rain-slick rock path that they followed along the face of the bluff. Its unpredictable flashes lighted the pathway far better than the feebly burning closed lantern Arbas carried.

"Careful here!" Arbas shouted back. "The rocks here are really slippery!" Ignoring his own advice, the assassin half slipped on a glistening boulder, and in struggling to keep his footing he very nearly threw the useless lantern over the edge.

The Thovnosian muttered savagely and concentrated on staying on the path. One slip on the streaming rocks would mean certain death among the rubble at the base of the bluffs. From somewhere in the darkness below, he could faintly hear the broken roar of rushing water pounding through the flooded stream bed.

Still there was no trace of fear in his voice as he growled, "Couldn't you have arranged for Kane to meet me somewhere dry?"

Arbas looked back with a wet grin of sardonic amusement written upon his dark face. "Changing your mind about meeting him, are you?" He laughed as his companion answered him with a torrent of curses. "It's a good night for our purposes, actually--the storm should give us cover from anyone who might try to follow us. Anyway, you know well enough that Kane couldn't show his face anywhere in the Combine with that price on his head. And even if it weren't for that, he's not too likely to come running for just anyone, unless it's damn well worth his while."

He added pointedly, "You still haven't said why you want to see Kane, you know."

"That's something for Kane to hear," retorted Imel.

Arbas nodded solemnly. "Uh-huh. Something for Kane to hear. Uh-huh. Well, don't let me be spoiling any dramatic secrets now. Wouldn't want that, of course."

But the Thovnosian chose to ignore him and lapsed into silence for the remainder of the climb.

Dark openings arose from the face of the stone wall to the right of them now. These were the doorways of the abandoned burial caverns, hand-hewn passages forced through the soft rock by slaves long dead with their masters. More than high enough to permit entrance of a tall man were these silent openings, and by the lightning flashes it appeared that the vaults within were considerably more spacious. Once-sturdy gates had barred access to the tombs in the past, but all seemed to have been forced at some time over the years. A few of the stronger doors stood ajar on frozen hinges, but most were missing entirely, or hanging at crazy angles--broken relics of rotted timber and corroded metal.

Imel speculated uneasily as to what hands might have torn asunder these stout portals to plunder the tombs they had protected--and why. It was a bad night for such thoughts. The darkness within the burial chambers was a far deeper gloom than that of the night, and time had not fully dispelled the stale odor of mouldering decay that tainted the damp air. His nerves crawled each time he nervously stepped past a gaping doorway, and his spine prickled with a sensation of hidden scrutiny. Now and again he caught the elusive sound of tiny scurrying and soft shuffling from within. Imel prayed it was only large rats startled in

their lairs that he heard. But then the storm played eerie tricks upon the senses.

"This should be it. I think," Arbas announced shortly, and he led the way into the musty shelter of one of the burial caverns. Arbas turned up the lantern, which had miraculously remained burning, and Imel observed that the cavern took the shape of an L. There was a preliminary passage some twenty feet long, then at right angles a second and larger passage about fifty feet in length. The eight-foot walls of this first section had been cut out to form a triple row of niches. Only a few of the mouldering coffins that were laid in these niches remained intact. Most were broken apart and their contents scattered--although whether this was from age or vandalism the Thovnosian could not immediately tell.

A double curtain of hide was hung across the passage just after it made its bend. The curtain had been placed there to cut down the chill draft from outside-- and to shut out the light from the lantern within. For as he stepped through the curtains, Imel saw that the chamber had been recently furnished for human occupancy.

Here in this ancient, shadow-haunted burial chamber Kane had made his lair.

"Well, where is he?" asked Imel brusquely. He was eager to get down to business and thereby shake off the dark, half-felt fears that had haunted him ever since he had entered the funerary district.

"Not used to waiting, are we now? Well, he'll get here in his own time, At least, he knows we're coming tonight," said Arbas, and appropriated the chamber's sole chair.

Cursing the assassin's insolence, Imel cast about the chamber for another seat. There was none. Still the chamber had been astonishingly well furnished--particularly so considering the difficulty and the danger of surveillance involved in bringing anything to these tombs. In the corner on the floor was a good bed of several large pelts and a mattress. Along with the chair there was a table with two lamps, several bottles, items of food and--most amazing of all--a number of books, scrolls, and writing implements. Scattered about the floor and empty niches were various other items--jars of oil, a crossbow and several quivers of bolts, utensils, more food, a battle-axe, and an assortment of rather ancient daggers, rings, and other bits of metalwork. There was a bed of ashes, still quite warm, where Kane had risked building small cooking fires. A stack of unburned wood indicated the use Kane had found for the coffins whose resting piece he had preempted.

Heaped in a pile were the discarded bones of the coffins' tenants, and as Imel looked at this mound he felt the hackles of his neck rise. He had never been known as a squeamish man, and there had been no indication that the spirits of these dead were to be reckoned with. Rather, his disquiet stemmed from the state of these mouldering bones. It was enough that they had been gnawed--this could have been done by rats--but beyond that, they had been meticulously cracked apart and the marrow scraped from within. Something human--or vaguely human--would have devoured the rotting corpses like this, reflected Imel. He shuddered even though the bones were old and crumbling.

Idly Imel stirred a curious finger through the litter of antique ornaments and metalwork. He was slightly disappointed to discover nothing of consequence. "Kane been pilfering tombs for this junk?" he asked, startled at the loudness of his voice.

The assassin shrugged. "I don't know. He's been holed up here long enough to go stir-crazy, but I'd guess he was just collecting the stuff to keep busy. Maybe he's thinking about making something with it. Maybe write up a catalogue for the pedants at the academy up in Matnabla. You know, I mean what would you do up here all the time? Kane's... I don't know." He broke off in a mutter and became interested in his dagger.

Imel sighed in frustration, searching about the chamber for diversion. He noticed a cryptic pattern of intricate design and archaic pictographs arched over the threshold. Based on what he had seen thus far, he shrewdly guessed that this represented some manner of charm against the supernatural. Without comprehension he studied the talisman for a space, scratching, slowly at the unaccustomed stubble he had let grow over his features.

The noise of the tempest outside, coupled with his unnatural surroundings, was making Imel more nervous by the minute. He crossed over to the table where Arbas nonchalantly honed his dagger upon a stone Kane had placed there. Leaning over, he looked at the books there in admiration--although more for their monetary than intellectual value. Curiously he leafed through several of them. Two were in the language of the Combine, and of the others, only one was in a language that looked even vaguely familiar. One very old one was extremely unusual, for the strange characters on its pages did not quite appear to have been handwritten. Imel wondered what type of book would seem so interesting to Kane that he would have transported several of them to the crypt. It was surprising enough to see that Kane could actually read, mused Imel. What little information he had compiled gave Kane the reputation of being a rugged and skillful warrior--a violent personality by all accounts. In Imel's experience, such a man usually was contemptuous of anything concerned with the arts.

Idly he looked through one of the two volumes written in the language of the Combine. Suddenly his eyes were held by a page filled entirely by a strange diagram. Startled, he slowly read the script on the page opposite and found his suspicions verified. With horror he shut the book and abruptly set it down. A grimoire. Was Kane then a sorcerer as well as a soldier? Imel remembered Arbas's warning and began to feel fear.

He looked at Arbas and found the assassin grinning at him over his dagger. Sidelong he had been watching Imel and had seen the sudden terror in his eyes. Anger at revealing his emotions flooded Imel, washing away the fear--fear, he told himself, that any sane man feels when confronted with the paraphernalia of black sorcery.

"Stop your stupid smirking!" he snarled at Arbas, who merely chuckled in reply. Cursing fervently, the Thovnosian paced the chamber. By Tloluvin! He was a fool ever to have undertaken this mission--a fool ever to have become involved in her insane schemes! Realizing that he was fast losing control, he halted and struggled to regain his composure.

"Is Kane going to get here or not?" he demanded.

Arbas shrugged; he seemed to be getting impatient himself. "Perhaps he doesn't realize we're here yet," he offered. "Let's just take a lantern and show its light out on the ledge for a bit. I doubt if anyone other than Kane is around here to see it on a night like this." So saying, he picked up his battered lantern and moved toward the curtain wall.

They had just gone through the curtain and were starting toward the tunnel's mouth when an extended burst of chain lightning split the midnight skies and threw a flickering bluish light on the figure just entering the crypt. Startled, Imel was unable to suppress a gasp at the sight of the looming cloaked figure silhouetted darkly against the lightning-blasted torrent. Arbas's words at their first meeting flashed through Imel's mind: Look for him in the Seventh Hell! Truly, this nightmarish scene could justifiably be that of a demon--or Lord Tloluvin himself--emerging from the Seventh Hell.

For the space of a heartbeat the lightning gave hellish illumination upon the figure. No features were discernible in the glare. He appeared only as a black shadow, the wind whipping his rain-drenched cloak

and garments, his powerful body braced against the storm. His drawn sword glinted in the lightning, as did his eyes--sinister spots of fire in the darkness.

Then the lightning burst faded, and the figure stalked into the crypt. "Get that light under cover!" snapped Kane.

Arbas moved the curtain aside, and Kane stepped through, flinging off his sodden cloak and shaking a flood of water from his massive body. Cursing in some strange tongue, he poured himself a full cup of wine, drained it, and began pouring another. "A beautiful storm, but drying out from it in this dank hole is not to my liking," he growled between cups. "Arbas, see if that fire can be rekindled. The smoke won't be a danger tonight.

"Sit down and have some wine, Imel. It's excellent for cleansing the damp from your insides. These Lartroxians keep surprisingly good vineyards, I'll always grant them that." Pouring a third cup, he moved to where Arbas worked with the fire.

Gratefully Imel slumped into the chair and, seeing no other cup, gingerly drank the heavy wine from its bottle. He had been unnerved by the past hour's events, and the liquor warmed and steadied him. Missions of this sort ran against his nature, and he wished again, as he so often had before, that he could have talked her into sending someone else. That despicable Oxfors Alremas, perhaps. Not that he cared to rate Alremas superior in his missions of intrigue and cunning diplomacy. Still the Pellin lord's self-esteem at times grew insufferable, and Imel wondered how Alremas's aristocratic sensibilities would fare under the abuse he had himself thus far sustained.

Arbas soon had the fire ablaze with the dry wood from the caskets. Most of the smoke was sucked without by the storm winds, and it was not too uncomfortable. The flames lit the crypt as it had not been before, and Imel was able now to get his first good look at Kane.

He was a large man, a little over six feet in height, although he seemed shorter because of the extreme massiveness of his body. Thick neck, a barrel chest, strong, heavily muscled arms and legs--everything created in him an aura of great power. Even his hands were overlarge and the fingers long and powerful. Less brutal, they might have been called an artist's hands. Imel had once seen such hands before--on a notorious strangler, whose execution he had attended. As an embellishment on the Imperial law, the severed hands had been displayed alongside the impaled head in Thovnosten's Justice Square. Kane's age was hard to guess; he looked perhaps like a man of thirty in body, but he seemed to be older somehow. Imel had expected to find an older man, so he estimated Kane to be in his fifties and well preserved. Kane's complexion was fair and his hair light red, cut evenly to moderate length. His beard was short, and the features of his face were rugged and heavy--too primitively coarse to be considered handsome.

Kane sensed Imel's inspection and suddenly locked eyes with him. Abruptly there returned the chilling sensation that had earlier pulsed through Imel during the lightning burst. The eyes of Kane were like two blue-burning crystals of ice. Within them stirred a frozen fire of madness, death, torment, hellish hatred. They looked straight through Imel, searching out his innermost thoughts, searing his very soul. They were the eyes of a maddened killer.

With a cruel laugh, Kane turned away, releasing Imel from the spell of his eyes. His mind staggered back, and it was with effort that he suppressed blind panic. In a daze, his hand groped for the wine bottle. Gladly he made use of the wine's restorative virtue.

She who sent him on this mission to Kane had always instilled in Imel a feeling of revulsion. She was but

a twisted, broken vessel of hatred, kept living by her depraved lust for vengeance. To be sure, no man could approach her without feeling the dark fire of her insane hatred. But this revulsion was nothing compared to the terror that had blasted Imel when he looked into the eyes of Kane. Insanity gleamed there, but in complement with a cold murder-lust. Insensate craving to kill and destroy--consuming hatred of life. With such eyes would Death receive the newly dead, or Lord Tloluvin welcome some hideously damned soul to his realm of eternal darkness.

"Now then, Imel, what business do you have that concerns me?"

Imel snapped out of his musings as Kane addressed him. Looking up, he found Kane had quit the fire and was half-sitting on the table across from him. He was watching Imel closely, a mocking smile over his brutal features--the hellish blaze of his eyes subdued but smouldering still. His long fingers were toying with a silver ring. Imel assumed it was one from the pile of artifacts.

"I think you'd better have a very good reason for demanding to see me. Not that my time in this hole is in anything like short supply, but your coming here has put myself and Arbas in some danger." He held the ring to the light appraisingly. Seemingly he was intrigued with its intricate carvings. "You're sure, of course, that no one followed you..."

Casually Kane drew the lamp closer to him, the better to examine the ring. Imel frowned in vexation. "Interesting..." Kane muttered, extending the ring into the light. A soft violet glow emanated from the huge amethyst. Imel recognized the ring.

Cold fear seized him as realization dawned. Imel's hand streaked for the sword at his side. He had but touched its hilt when an arm whipped around from behind him, and a dagger point painfully tickled the flesh of his throat. Arbas! He had forgotten the assassin.

"Don't kill him just yet, Arbas," said Kane, who had not moved throughout. "You know, I think Imel knows that ring."

The assassin tickled his dagger point as the Thovnosian wanted to rise. Imel subsided. "Now how do you figure that?" Arbas asked with assumed bewilderment.

"Well, I think it's the way his face turned pale when he saw it. Or what do you make of that?"

"Could be he's just startled by that large a sapphire."

"No, I doubt that. Anyway, this is an amethyst."

"Same thing."

"No, I think you're on the wrong track, Arbas. I'll bet Imel was just thinking that the last time he saw this ring, it was on someone's hand he knew. Say, maybe that big skulking bastard who was following you two."

Arbas's voice was edged. "Following us! Now, Imel, that makes me look sort of gullible." He dug the dagger point deeper. Imel's breath came in ragged gasps as he attempted to contract his throat from the stinging blade.

"This is a Mycean blade," the assassin explained in Imel's ear. "Those mountain clansmen spend weeks forging their steel, shaping it just so. They say the steel will grow weak and brittle like a lowland

blade--unless it takes a long drink of an enemy's warm blood every ten days or so."

"From here I'd say the workmanship was Pellinite," Kane observed.

"That's because it was a Pellinite craftsman who fitted the haft for me," rejoined Arbas in an offended manner. "Anyway, the nobleman who owned the knife before I killed him had always sworn it was a Mycean blade. The steel is unmistakable--watch how it glides through Imel's throat."

Kane shook his head and stood up. "Later, perhaps. Let him breathe now, though. As it happened, there was only one man who followed you, and I was waiting for him. I think Imel will talk freely now." His eyes held Imel in their deadly stare, now burning bright with anger. Imel knew he was very close to death. "Who was he? Why was he following you?" Kane did not waste adding a warning not to lie, and Imel probably couldn't have anyway--held in the cold grip of those eyes.

"An officer who accompanied me from Thovnos. He was my bodyguard. I've been through the slums of Nostoblet trying to find you, and I felt it necessary to have him accompany me at a discreet distance. Tonight I ordered him to follow me when I went with Arbas."

Kane considered him at length. "Yes; because you didn't trust him--and with good reason. Once he got you alone, Arbas would have killed you without compunction for whatever valuables you carried--had I not told him to bring you here. Curiosity on my part. All friend Bindoff could tell me was that you were a younger offshoot of somewhat impoverished Thovnosian gentry, a man of dubious integrity but reputedly adroit--and that you came to him with rather curious credentials and asked where to find me.

"So you are justified, but not pardoned. With every good soul in all South Lartroxia thirsting for my blood, I can take no chances. Your coming here was a risk; your coming with an escort was a worse risk. Maybe luck favors me this night, for I could discover no evidence that your friend was followed. At any rate, I was forced to wait in the rain even longer after I'd dealt with One-Ear, to be certain he wasn't followed. You see, I didn't trust you either, Imel. So I was waiting out there in the rocks beside the path. Watched you and Arbas go by, and then met your friend. I think I may have given him a bad fright. He did have an interesting ring, though."

With deceptive carelessness he tossed the ring onto the pile of odds and ends pilfered from the tombs. He signed the disappointed assassin to release the Thovnosian, then demanded, "Once again, What's your business?"

Imel slowly let out his breath as the dagger point withdrew. Trickle of sweat stung as they slid over the scarlet line across his throat. His neck felt dry where the assassin's hot breath had hit. Gathering his shaken wits for an effort on which he knew his life hung, Imel began, "I was sent here by one who desires your services--and who is willing to pay for them royally."

"Really? That's a bit vague, but it has a nice ring. Be more precise, though. In what form?"

"Wealth, power, position--a kingdom, perhaps."

"Now you begin to interest me. Let's hear details. Particularly with regard to my 'services,' as you put it."

"Certainly. But first, what do you know of the affairs of the Thovnosian Empire?"

"Of its current affairs very little. It has been some years since I visited the islands."

"In that event, you will pardon me if I embark upon a somewhat lengthy tale to explain my mission."

"If I find it interesting," Kane murmured--then exclaimed softly, "Damn! Look here!" An evil-hued tomb beetle clattered to the table and lumbered determinedly toward the flickering lamp. Kane caught the large scarab up and fascinatedly watched it crawl from hand to hand. "Messenger from the dead. They love to burrow inside a rotting skull." He glanced up at Imel's strained face.

"Go ahead. I'm listening."

Imel's Tale

Netisten Maril today rules as Monarch of Thovnos, from which throne he is also Emperor of the Thovnosian Empire--an island federation south and east of the Lartroxian coast, beyond the Middle Sea that separates the continents of Lartroxia and the Southern Lands. As you may be aware, the Empire was formed two centuries ago from this broken subcontinent of eight major islands, some 2000 to 3000 square miles each--along with a dozen or so smaller islands and countless bits of land too small for mention. As the largest and most powerful island, Thovnos has been the seat of empire for most of the Empire's history, and Netisten Maril is a true descendant of a line that has long bred strong, capable rulers.

When his father, Netisten Sirrome, died, there was but one other claimant to the throne--Netisten Maril's older half-brother, Leyan, who was the bastard son of Netisten Sirrome and a seductive noblewoman from Tresli. Because he was illegitimate, Leyan did not bear the dynastic name and had no chance of succession--unless Maril should die without male heir. Thus he was dismayed when at an early age his younger brother married a distant cousin from Quarnora and soon had her with child.

His young wife bore him a daughter, M'Cori by name, and soon after became pregnant again. But as her time again drew near, she sickened and died without giving birth. Gossip suggests that Leyan had her poisoned to prevent a new heir, but she was always known to be a frail child, and perhaps the strain of bearing two children in quick succession proved more than she could endure.

Maril was unapproachable for months thereafter, his spirit tormented by several strong passions. First was a terrible fit of frustrated rage--for he himself had laid her womb open and wrenched out the son who lacked only a few weeks of natural birth. But he had loved her deeply, and as his rage subsided to despair, he was, tortured with guilt--blaming himself for forcing his young wife too hard to bring him a son. Time slowly healed the passions that tore at him, but he was left a hard and loveless man--with a temper made worse that had never been mild. He seemed to push all thought of past or future marriage

from his mind, and the child M'Cori suffered from neglect. It was Leyan who cared for her needs--not so much from pity, but because he himself had fathered two sturdy sons, Lages and Roget, and favored the idea of marrying a son to their cousin, M'Cori--thus securing the succession for his line if not for himself.

The passing years favored his enterprise, as Maril remained unwed, and M'Cori grew into girlhood--a child of startling beauty and a lack of guile that bordered on simple-mindedness. She felt a touching gratitude toward her uncle and a clinging devotion toward his sons. Lages and Roget grew into strong young men and were their father's pride--skilled in arms and leadership, well-favored in appearance, adept in the graces of nobility. Leyan saw them as true princes of the blood. He was stricken when Roget, the older and less rash of his sons, died a hero's death at twenty-two while leading his uncle's army against rebels on the island Fisitia. He was avenged by his brother, Lages, who made up with quick temper what he lacked of Roget's quick wit. M'Cori shared in the mourning for Roget, for the three had grown up together as brothers and sister. But when mourning was done, she and Lages had become lovers.

Then four years ago Leyan saw happen that which threatened all his carefully laid plans. Netisten Maril was in love again.

From the ill-starred northern island of Pellin came a woman of unearthly beauty. Efrell was her name. She was of the best blood; her family had given their name to the island kingdom where they had ruled for long centuries. When the Empire was formed, it was thought that the Pellin lords would be its rulers, as their blood was the oldest and most noble. But Pellin had fallen on dark days, and the aged kingdom was no match for the younger, stronger kingdoms to the south. Indeed, all threats to Thovnos's domination have come from its young neighbors and not from remote Pellin--although it is no secret that the lords of Pellin have always dreamed of someday holding the reins of empire.

But the island Pellin has had an evil reputation since the earliest days when man first crossed the Western Sea to settle in this region. Our history is old, and very much of the centuries preceding the Empire's foundation has become obscured by myth and legend. Nonetheless, the strange stone ruins that are to be found mouldering in certain shunned locations among the islands defy all understanding. Of the race that built these monolithic citadels we know nothing. Legend insists that these ruins were here before the coming of man to the islands. Certainly the crumbling stones are of marvelous antiquity, and no man can guess what ages have passed since these cyclopean fortresses were raised, nor at whose hand they were destroyed. There are curious myths that hint of frightful carvings depicting colossal scenes of combat among monstrous sea beasts from a mad god's nightmare. The first seafarers who settled the islands left unsavory rumors of things carved upon certain of the eroded stones--hideous scenes they took pains to obliterate forever with frightened blows of hammer and chisel. No such carvings today remain to verify these myths. It is on the island of Pellin that these lichen-covered ruins are to be found in greatest concentration--nor are they in so advanced a state of decay as those on the southern islands.

Certainly it is not solely due to the immeasurably deep waters to the north of Pellin that no fisherman will cast nets there, that merchants sail many leagues off course to avoid the region. This area of the Western Sea is named the Sorn-Ellyn, which is said to mean "bottomless sea" in an archaic tongue. Its depths have never been plumbed. Legend says that the Earth has split asunder there, and that the waters of the Sorn-Ellyn flow down into the cosmic ocean upon which our world floats. A pretty concept, of course, and derived from folk myths of our universe's creation--though philosophers have since learned more bewildering theories to dispute.

Less easy to dismiss are the wild and unsettling stories told over the years by those few men who have ventured across the Sorn-Ellyn and returned--or so they claim. They spread fantastic tales of ghostly lights glimpsed at night from far down beneath the sea, of weird shapes only half seen that moved about

on the black waves on nights of the full moon. Some claim they have heard an eerie whining sound that echoes from under the sea--a droning that makes men cry out in agony and drives ships' dogs insane with fear. Horrible sea monsters are said to haunt the Sorn-Ellyn as they lurk in the waters of no other sea--loathsome creatures that can drag beneath the waves an entire ship and her crew. The oldest legends speak of an elder race of demons who dwell in the black depths of the Sorn-Ellyn, eager to destroy all fools who dare trespass within their sunken realm.

And with these dark legends of the past there are mingled more recent tales that seamen speak of with fear yet in their eyes. Such reports are scoffed at by day, or told for a safe shudder over alecups--but not mentioned at night and at sea.

One such: A few years back a captain from Tresli was sailing home with a rich cargo of Lartroxian grain. Wishing to expose his cargo to the ocean damp no longer than necessary--and to make port ahead of his competitors--he chose to sail north across the Sorn-Ellyn, rather than take the circuitous route through the islands south of Pellin. His crew was uneasy, but the captain bribed them with extra pay--knowing the higher prices his grain could command if he returned before his rivals.

As they entered the Sorn-Ellyn, the lookout sighted wreckage. Sailing closer, they discovered a splintered section of hull from an Ammurian vessel, and tied to the half-submerged timbers was a lone survivor. The sailor had been adrift for days after his ship was lost, but it was not only exposure and lack of food and water that had reduced him to a screaming, mindless madman. He went berserk when they lifted him aboard. Throwing off those who tried to minister to tortured flesh, he shrieked insanely of slimy black tentacles and faceless demons from the sea. As they tied him to a bed, the crewmen were sickened by the horrible scars that pitted his shrunken body--as if the man had been wrapped with links of red-hot chain.

Little could be made of his pitiful raving, but enough came through so that the captain was forced to turn his ship and speed away to avoid certain mutiny. And strangest to tell, during the first night after his rescue the castaway suddenly awoke from nightmare-tortured sleep, threw off the bonds that restrained him, and with maniacal strength burst past those who tried to hold him. Laughing and gibbering, he threw himself into the sea. A seaman who watched him swim out of sight swore he saw a strange light glowing beneath the dark waters, and several others claimed to have faintly heard an eerie humming sound coming from far below.

There are many other strange stories--enough to indicate that there is something unwholesome about Pellin and the sea around it. And this same shadow of evil hovers over the royal family, for it is acknowledged that the Pellin lords have long delved into mysteries best left unsounded. It is commonly known that Efre's great-grandfather murdered his youngest granddaughter and bathed in her blood to restore his youth. Of his success we shall never know, as his angry son eviscerated him shortly thereafter.

Deep beneath the cellars and dungeons of Dan-Legeh, black citadel of the Pellin lords, there is said to lie a great subterranean chamber. Within this vast cavern the Pellin lords have for centuries tortured their enemies and pursued their infamous study of sorcerous lore. The few outsiders to enter this chamber and emerge again with whole mind have told of a great pool in the floor of the cavern--whose waters rise and ebb with the tides. Into this pool's black depths have disappeared many of those secrets Pellin has not deigned to share.

But to bring my tale back to matters of the present day, and to Efre:

It was into this same hidden chamber on a night some thirty years ago that Pellin Othrin, then Monarch of Pellin, carried a screaming and naked girl--and though she was his teenaged cousin, Wehrle, no man

dared interfere. What they did there no man ever learned for at dawn Wehrle crawled forth half-lifeless and with madness in her staring eyes. Pellin Othrin was silent as to what had transpired, nor did any man dare inquire. Not long after, Lyrde, Othrin's wife, who had borne him no children, fell strangely ill and died. While the ashes of her pyre were yet warm, Othrin announced that he would make Wehrle his new queen. Some wondered that he would wed the unfortunate girl, for they knew Othrin had no germ of pity in his heart. Nor could they understand why Othrin slew the physician and nurse who attended the birth of their daughter a few months later, for the child was perfect in every way.

This daughter was Efre. Wehrle's madness grew deeper after Efre's birth, so that at times she had to be restrained from attacking the child. Pellin Othrin placed his wife in private chambers with attendants constantly on guard against her rages. When Efre was old enough to leave her mother's breast, she was given over to a nurse, and afterward no more was said of Wehrle, nor did any man ask. As Efre grew from infancy, Othrin kept her by his side and gave personal attention to every detail of her education--in statecraft and in the secret delvings of the Pellin lords.

One night Pellin Othrin was found strangled in his chambers, though no outcry had been heard. His guards could not explain how the assassin had slipped past them, nor guess what strangler's cord had circled their lord's body with livid red stigmata, nor yet account for the seaweed that hung in his beard.

His sudden death left Pellin without male heir, but there was precedent in Pellin's long history when the island had been ruled by a woman. And Pellin Othrin had taught his daughter well. Thus Efre ascended the ancient throne of Pellin as Queen. It was not to be long before she would be Empress as well.

Of Efre it is said that she pursued the study of demonology and the black arts with a passion beyond that of any of her unhallowed ancestors. Perhaps she was spurred on by the desire to rekindle the ancient glory of the House of Pellin, which was inexorably drifting toward obscurity within the growing Empire. Possibly she caught ways to revitalize the anemic blood of her line, whose heirs were fewer and sicklier with each generation, and the madness that haunted the House of Pellin grew stronger apace.

Then again, there is a persistent rumor that Efre is only half human--that her real father was not Pellin Othrin, but a demon of his conjuration, who had lain with Wehrle on that night when sanity was driven from her. Certainly there is some little to be offered in defense of this whispered theory. It might explain Efre's obsessive interest in sorcery and other arcane researches, for one thing. And further, it might account for her inhuman beauty--or for her vitality that is like a weed to the anemic blooms that others of her line resemble. Perhaps her unnatural parentage gave her power to inflame Netisten Maril, who in his late thirties was as cold and unapproachable a man as ever.

Netisten Maril saw Efre for the first time when she was presented to him at court one day. She moved gracefully in a clinging swirl of a gown pieced from the opalescent scales of blind sea-snakes dredged from the Sorn-Ellyn. When introductions were effected by their servants as court etiquette prescribed, the seductress explained to Maril that she had come from Pellin to pay her respects to him and to remain for a while in the Imperial Court, such being the privilege of one of royal lineage. From that moment Maril thought of little else but Efre, for her exotic beauty and her aura of mystery (and perhaps her glamour) had thoroughly conquered his long slumbering passions. Rekindled after so long, they blazed anew with pent-up fire--and it was evident to all that Thovnos would very soon have a new queen.

To be sure, the turn of events dismayed Leyan, as well as many others, who foretold that there could be nothing but misfortune from a union with ill-famed Pellin. But Maril was totally in love with this pale-skinned beauty of midnight tresses and eyes so dark they shone like onyx. Even those who hated the court's newest star granted that her beauty transcended in every particular that of any other woman of their experience--including M'Cori, who under Leyan's shelter was advancing in the Imperial Court as an

ingenu of uncommon loveliness. And objections to the Emperor's imminent marriage were effectively hushed when Maril ordered a trusted advisor beheaded after becoming enraged at his well-meant advice.

So they were married, and the Empire settled back to make the best of the new situation. However, to her chagrin, Efreel soon discovered that although she had won into Maril's bed, she could not insinuate herself onto his throne. For Maril was a man of strong will who kept the affairs of his personal life unmixed with affairs of the Empire. Thus Efreel found her ambitions of ruling behind the throne stillborn for all her wiles and secret glamour, and the many nobility she had brought as entourage remained without influence or important position.

And as time went by, Efreel felt even her hold on Maril's affections loosening--for strong passions too often exhaust the spirit and burn out quickly. But more important, despite Maril's enthusiastic efforts, he was unable to get Efreel pregnant. Again a male heir eluded him, and this renewed frustration blighted his passion for her. Of his own virility there could be no question; it must then be Efreel who was barren. In his dark moods perhaps Maril remembered the old rumors concerning Efreel's inhuman parentage--for it is common that hybrids are sterile. Angrily he severed all but the most formal relations with his wife.

Despairing of realizing her ambitions with Maril, Efreel then turned to intrigue. Seeking out Leyan, she easily seduced him with her ready beauty--and with the promise to aid Leyan in his bid for the Imperial throne. For if Netisten Maril died without male heir, Leyan would be his successor. The idea had, of course, often occurred to Leyan, but he was well aware of his half-brother's careful measures to prevent assassination, and that he would be the obvious culprit in the event of success. But many a man has lost all caution in a woman's embrace, and so it was with Leyan.

The two conspired to murder Netisten Maril with a slow-acting poison of Efreel's devising, whose certain toxins would mimic a natural illness. Any resistance at court to Leyan's succession they would quell with an army secretly loyal to them. The plot was well underway, and several of the nobility had sworn allegiance to Leyan in return for promised rewards under his reign. Then disaster struck the conspirators.

Maril had always been on the alert for conspiracy, especially from his half-brother. He had taken extensive precautions, and his spy system was more effective than either Efreel or Leyan had realized. Thus Maril learned of the plot before it could mature. One night he surprised the two together in Efreel's bedchamber and announced to them that all who had entered into conspiracy with them were being arrested even at that moment.

Leyan came out from the sheets with time to draw his sword, if not draw on his pants, before Maril's guards could intervene. But Maril with characteristic rashness ordered his men not to interfere and welcomed his brother's attack. Then followed a desperate bit of swordplay--for Leyan might still win an empire should he win this duel, and the only alternative was certain death. For what those who watched swore was fully half an hour, though exaggeration is understandable, these two seasoned veterans fought--each skilled from constant training and hardened from many campaigns. Leyan was judged to be the better swordsman, but Maril, I think by design, had confronted his brother while he was groggy from wine and recent loveplay. Further, Leyan was naked, and Maril wore mail.

Gradually Maril forced him back, slowly wearing down his frantic defenses, parrying his superior sword-play with growing confidence. A small cut here, a barely parried thrust there--slashes that mail would turn and bare flesh could not. Finally Leyan moved a heartbeat too slow to counter the deceptive slash of Maril's powerful sword arm. His brother's blade clove through his side, and down toppled Leyan--his final curses strangled by the blood that filled sundered lungs. His fate was the easiest of the conspirators.

Efrel then tried suicide, it is said--but the guards were too swift and stopped her dagger short of her breast. Maril left her beside the corpse under close guard--there to ponder the fate that would await her with the new day.

At dawn Maril sent out criers to tell Thovnosten's populace of the aborted conspiracy--and to summon them to the execution at noon. The people flocked to the central square, eager for the spectacle and the promised food and drink given in celebration of their loyalty to Netisten Maril. Peddlers, hawkers, and vendors descended like vultures from the cloudless sky.

Efrel arrived clad in her most splendid gown and jewelry. Those with memories for such things recognized it as the gown she wore when first she bewitched Maril. She was enthroned at the side of Netisten Maril as usual, but instead of ladies-in-waiting, there were guards to see to her comfort. Then while Efrel watched, the six lords who had sworn allegiance to Leyan were led out and bound to frames erected during the night. After attention had been given to their tongues with red-hot pincers and to their limbs with iron rods, their families and servants were brought out. Slowly, without breaking the neck--so to prolong the agony--every man, woman, and child of them was hanged before the lords' eyes. And once they had witnessed the deaths of all their households, the conspirators were cunningly impaled and hung like spitted steers over slow fires. A ghastly penalty, but such is the punishment just laws demand for conspiracy against our lawful government.

Throughout the long afternoon--for it was near dusk when the last lord had died--Efrel had been forced to watch the gruesome spectacle--her torture made worse because she was still treated with every show of respect. What must have passed through her mind only the gods know. She knew Maril to be without pity--a man overruled by his volcanic emotions. She knew that mercy was not to be hoped for. But perhaps mingled with dread anticipation there was a scrap of hope that Maril might deal mercifully with one whom he once had loved. Foolish hope, if hope there was.

When the last gruesome carcass had ceased to writhe, and the crowd shuffled with boredom, awaiting a finale worthy of their long attention, Maril turned to Efrel.

"For you, Efrel--deceptive whore with serpent's kisses--I have devised a less common death. One that suits your animal lusts and noble blood. I've found a consort equal to your gentle character and pristine morals." As she shrank in fear from the rage that twisted his face and choked his voice, Maril signed to his guard.

Then several strong slaves came into the square. They led a fiercely heaving wild bull. To restrain the animal called for all their sweaty effort, for it was driven mad with pain and drugs. More so were those who held Efrel compelled to exert all their strength--for the girl had become frenzied at the sight of her fate.

They carried the struggling girl, beautiful despite her terror in all her exquisite finery, into the square. There they cuffed her wrists to two long silver chains that were fastened to a collar about the bull's neck. A section of the crowd was moved aside, and the bull and the Empress were led into a narrow street leading through the city and beyond the gates.

As she saw the hopelessness of her plight, Efrel's terror gave way to venomous fury. She cursed Netisten Maril and vowed vengeance in a manner that chilled the souls of those already sated with torture. She swore by strange gods that she would return to bring red flames and utter ruin to all Thovnos, to wrest from Maril his throne and all that was his. Maril only laughed at her and signaled the slaves to release the bull.

With a last shriek of inhuman hatred, Efrek was jerked from her feet and dragged across the paving as the maddened bull plunged away. The enraged beast plummeted down the winding, cobbled streets as it sought to find the freedom of its native meadows--pounding headlong past walls and buildings and taunting creatures, past tenements and hovels and paving that gave way to dirt. It never gave a thought to the slight burden that bounced and smacked behind its hooves--a mewling, broken thing that left a trail of blood and scraped flesh upon the rough pavement over which it passed.

"The whore leaves us with her new consort!" roared Maril. "There'll be little of the bride left for the groom by the time he carries her past our walls--but I wish him better luck with it! Let her serpent's carcass lie unburied wherever it chances to fall--and let no man again speak her name to me!" With that Netisten Maril contrived to dismiss the matter from his thoughts.

Better would it have been for Maril had he first made certain of her death. A number of Efrek's loyal retainers had eluded Maril's wrath. They caught the bull as it reached the twilight-hung outskirts of the city, and there they killed it and stopped its flight. Although they did this seeking only to recover their queen's body for proper burial, they discovered to their utter astonishment that the mutilated body still lived!

Again the half-human, half-demon parentage seems to apply--for surely only an inhuman vitality could survive such an ordeal. Yet, live she did--for the Pellinites immediately bore her to the ship they had hidden in a secret cove and set sail for their homeland. Fearing relentless pursuit should Maril learn that Efrek still lived, all were sworn to secrecy--agreeing to say no more than that they had reclaimed their queen's corpse. And all human logic would suspect nothing further.

This was nearly two years ago. In this time Efrek has recovered--thanks to her unnatural vitality and to the skill of the court physicians. But she is no longer a woman of unearthly beauty--only a hideously mutilated wreck of humanity that hides from the sight of men. Life is held in her ruined body only by an all-consuming lust for vengeance upon Netisten Maril and all that is his. In her hidden chambers within Dan-Legeh, Efrek spins her web of vengeance, and only a trusted elite are privy to her commands.

Unceasingly since her return to strength has she intrigued to gather an army about her. She has delved ever deeper into the occult mysteries, seeking to marshal forces of the other planes for her vengeance. The others of her family are powerless or unwilling to halt the destructive designs of her fiendish energy. Her hidden conspiracy against Thovnos and its Monarch progresses daily, and she seeks everywhere for those who will aid her in this. Soon the magnitude of the venture must alert Maril to its existence--assuming he does not already suspect.

In some unknown manner Efrek became aware of your presence here, milord--and she is convinced that your generalship is essential for her victory in the rebellion. Accordingly, she has sent me to you as an emissary to secure your aid.

In conclusion, Efrek offers this proposition: Assume leadership of her naval forces, and when victory is ours, your reward shall be the island kingdom of your choice--saving Thovnos and Pellin.

There was quiet as Imel finished his narrative. Kane sipped his wine and brooded over the tale. The tomb beetle had finally given up its obsession with the lamplight and escaped on some other errand.

At length Kane turned to Imel and said, "Well, your story does interest me. I'll have to look over your Queen's set-up before I decide definitely, but what you say sounds attractive. Dramatic, but in content your account is in keeping with various things I've heard from time to time.

"The main problem, though, is how to get out of here. I assume you have made some sort of arrangements?"

Imel felt his insides slowly unknot as the tension left him. The first part of his mission was going to be a success. The rest would be on more familiar ground for him. "Yes. We have a small craft, fast and well-manned, hidden in a cove along the coast maybe thirty miles from here. If we reach it, I think we can run or fight through any blockade the Combine may have sent out--these Lartroxians never were worth much on the seas."

"Our light cavalry is good enough," growled Arbas, feeling something approaching patriotism.

"That's true," conceded Imel. "And herein is our greatest danger. They have mounted patrols covering the roads and passes through the mountains, so we'll have to sneak through them or plan a running fight. Fortunately, the authorities have grown lax in their search for you, Kane, and we won't have as much trouble as we would have had, say, two months ago."

"Yeah. I know about those damned patrols. I was waiting for them to grow laxer still," said Kane. "There are definite advantages to biding your time..."

"Advantages we can't wait for, I'm afraid. We've already pressed our luck by waiting this long. If the ship is discovered, everything is ruined. We don't dare hold off any later than tomorrow night."

"How many men do you have with you?"

"Seven--no, six," Imel corrected.

"Well, that should be enough men to carry us through a running fight, though that many will be ticklish to slip past any large patrols unseen." Kane rubbed his beard in thought. "Coming along, Arbas?"

"No, thanks," the assassin replied. "My trade affords me both wealth and excitement enough for my tastes. Conspiracy on so large a scale is not to my liking."

They passed another hour settling details and swapping anecdotes over a jar of wine, and Imel began to think that Kane could be almost likable if you just avoided his eyes. The man was an enigma: gigantic, of savage strength, a hardened warrior; withal he was no barbarian outlaw, but a man of cold intelligence whose knowledge was extensive in whatever area their conversation touched.

At last when the storm had somewhat abated, Arbas and Imel slipped out and began to pick their course carefully back along the rain-slick ledge. They were almost beyond the tombs when the light of Arbas's lantern caught something white moving toward them.

"Watch it!" hissed Arbas and whipped out his sword. Biting back the taste of fear that the weird apparition had churned in his gut, Imel did likewise--hoping it was only soldiers that they had to deal with.

Arbas threw open the lantern shield. The white object suddenly fell with a slopping thud. Half-seen in the flickering light, emaciated figures with leprous flesh crouched and snarled--then scurried off into the

shadows. The shapes disappeared into the night, although an occasional pair of luminous eyes could be glimpsed beyond the lantern light.

Stealthily the two men approached the motionless object, and Imel suddenly felt recognition and with it, sickness. It was the corpse of the unfortunate bodyguard who had followed him and been cut down by Kane. The mystery of his presence here was clear at first glance. His body had been partially eaten, the fleshy parts of his face, arms, and legs gnawed away. Entrails hung across the ledge.

"Ghouls!" cursed Arbas. "Those were ghouls carrying him back to their dens to ripen!" He studied the shadows with grim intensity. "Well, let's just hope those carrion-eaters haven't the courage to attack two armed men with a light!"

"Ghouls!" Imel echoed. "What kind of man would choose as his lair these ghoul-infested tombs?"

II

Of Weavers and Webs

The storm began with renewed fury after Arbas had left with Efre's emissary. Lightning flung forked tongues against the eroded escarpment; thunder blasted the pitted stone, shook the mouldering sleepers in their beds of plundered decay. Within Kane's lair, the reverberating echoes sounded distant and unreal. Flickers of bluish light stole past the curtained doorway in fitful effulgence.

Kane hunched in his chair, drinking cup after cup of wine. Ordinarily he would have drunk no more than constant vigilance permitted. Tonight his mood was blacker than the storm outside, and enemies human or inhuman might steal upon him at their peril. His cruel face was set in dark rage, and the death-fires in his cold blue eyes matched the flickering hell of the storm.

Kane drained his cup with a grunt and reached carefully for the wine jar. It was empty. Kane swore and flung it into a corner of the crypt, already littered with broken glass of earlier jars. The thick glass struck something soft and bounded away without shattering. Kane muttered a curse and went to retrieve it. He intended to smash it properly.

The wine bottle had bounded onto a mound of rotted debris in a disused section of the crypt. It hung in the air a few inches clear of the wreckage. Its thick, black-green glass was smeared with blood and ichor.

Kane took a pull from the new bottle he had broken open as he crossed the chamber. His uncanny eyes focused in the near-darkness.

A cave spider had spun her web across the niches with their mouldering coffins and sardonic skeletons. As large as Kane's hand, the white-furred arachnid had snared a bat. The heavy bottle, flung aimlessly in Kane's blind wrath, had struck weaver and prey together--pulping them against the debris. Clotted with fur and chitin and venom and gore, the chance missile spun slowly in the thick web. It was a thing of beauty, the web, and meticulously woven....

Kane laughed mirthlessly. His blade slashed the web to make a shroud.

III

Escape to the Ship

The rain had stopped, but the quiet of the night was broken intermittently by rumbles of distant thunder. High among the splintered rocks that guarded the unfrequented roadway leading up to the escarpment, Kane crouched behind a boulder. Beside him lay a small pack of personal belongings along with an assortment of weapons. Crossbow at hand, Kane scanned the darkened roadway for sign of Imel and his men. From the trail below he was impossible to be seen--even by eyes that might search intently. Kane had told Imel to meet him at a point farther along the cliffs--but always wary of treachery, he chose to await the renegade from this point of vantage.

Regretfully he considered the priceless volumes of black knowledge which he had been forced to leave behind. Well, he had committed most of them to memory, and the Black Priest would recover them presently and return the accursed tomes to their niches within his shadowy vaults. There had been a very early transcription of Alorri-Zrokros's monumental Book of the Elders that had particularly captured his admiration. The later transcriptions could be deadly from errors and omissions, Kane well knew. Presumably he might have found room to include just this one bulky volume in his pack, but he knew the crumbling parchment would never survive the frantic dash to escape the Combine's vengeance that lay ahead. Perhaps he would return to Lartroxia when those who now hunted him were dead and their curses forgotten...

His keen ears caught the sound of hooves on stone. Riders were coming up the road--but who were they? Kane cocked his weapon past its safety stop, then searched along the path with eyes that saw more in darkness than man should.

Eight riders and nine horses--presumably an extra mount saddled for him. Their approach was furtive; soldiers would be watchful, but more confident. Kane strained his eyes and recognized Imel on the lead horse. Certain that this was his party, Kane fired the crossbow bolt across their path, drumming it into the trunk of a dead tree. It brought them to an effective, albeit abrupt, halt.

"Don't piss in your pants! It's me!" Kane called to the startled riders. Gathering his kit, he scrambled down over the boulders. Muttered profanity greeted him as he paused to cut the quarrel from the hardened trunk where the iron head was bored with force that would pierce the best mail as if it were silk.

"Have you been followed?" asked Kane, wrenching the bolt free.

"We don't think so--though it's a damn fool who says for sure. Did you have to shake the crap out of us like that? I was damn well sure we'd run into an ambush!"

Kane recognized the angry growl. "Arbas! So you're still with us! Surely sentiment hasn't driven you to see me off."

"Bindoff decided I'd better go along as guide in case we have to start dodging patrols," Arbas explained, watching Kane stow his gear on the horse they provided him. "I told him you could get lost in these hills as well as I could, but he was persuasive."

"An assassin for a guide. I like that," chuckled Kane. He swung his heavy frame into the saddle and made certain his battle-axe was in easy reach. "Let's ride, then."

The nine riders retraced their way up the neglected road. When they finally reached the main roadway, they headed southwest for the coast. One man rode ahead to scout for patrols. It was Imel's plan to force their way to the hidden ship by following as rapid a course as possible--speed rather than stealth, and trust to luck that they might not run into anything a quick fight could not carry them through. Drumming hoofbeats muffled their flight along the sodden road beneath storm-heavy midnight skies.

Twice along the way they had to leave the road to make a wide detour of army outposts that kept a check on all travellers. Then the ride was suddenly halted--as Essen, the scout, rushed back upon them.

Savagely reining- in his plunging horse, he gasped out, "Five of them! They heard me turn bark, and they're hot after me!"

Five. They had blundered upon a small patrol.

"Keep on running, and we'll ambush them," ordered Kane, taking charge without thinking twice. "Quick--the rest of you over here and take cover in the trees. They'll ride past hot on the trail and never look up. You with bows--get ready and we'll cut them down!"

He gave a quick critical glance at the terrain, then snapped, "You there without a bow--down the road and head off anyone who gets past us. Hurry, damn you!"

With a loud thrashing but not undue confusion, Kane's commands were carried out. Imel kept silent as he slid behind cover. He had had no illusions about who was commanding the band, anyway. Barely had they withdrawn into the shadow of the trees and readied their weapons when four Combine cavalymen tore into view.

Hoping that Imel had carefully selected his party, Kane fired his crossbow and sent the iron quarrel drilling through the eye of the lead rider. A deadly chorus of twangs followed on his shot, and two other riders catapulted from their saddles--each with a pair of shafts quivering in his chest. The fourth rider raced through unscathed--saved not by bad marksmanship, but because there had been no time for the archers to call their targets.

"Stop him, Labe! Damn it man, stop him!" shouted Imel, alerting the survivor to his new danger. He jerked free his sword just in time to meet the attack of the Pellinite who lay waiting for him. Desperately the soldier traded blows with his adversary--knowing the others would be on him in an instant. Then, using a trick that caught the inferior horseman unaware, the cavalryman crashed his mount into the other. Startled, Labe swayed off-balance, and the cavalryman slashed his blade downward through unguarded shoulder and into the other's spine.

Ripping his sword free from the blood-gushing corpse, the soldier bolted across the road for the shelter of the woods. He had just left the roadway when a searing pain pierced his throat and lifted him head over heels from his saddle. He fell in a broken jumble on the forest floor, blood pouring hotly over the quarrel that skewered his neck.

Kane lowered his crossbow, thankful that the brief struggle had given him time to get off a second shot. The crossbow's greater range and power balanced against the additional time it required to load and fire; someday Kane hoped to find a bow with equal power that was practical to use from horseback--not that a crossbow was much fun to manage on a running mount.

Essen rode back warily, having assumed from the disappearance of his pursuers that the skirmish was over. Kane questioned him, "Did I hear you right that there were five horsemen?"

"Yes, Five--I'm certain."

Kane made a remark about cavalrymen's mothers. "It seems then they weren't the eager fools I had hoped. They must have kept a man behind in case they ran into more than they could handle. Lato devour their cautious souls! If only they had been overconfident!"

"Now what?" Imel wanted to know. "How far is it to your cove?"

"From Imel's description I'd guess we're maybe halfway," Arbas answered without enthusiasm. Kane caught the assassin's eye and shrugged. "Well, the dice are cast now. The other soldier will have the whole Combine on the alert by now. It's suicide to bypass the roadway and try to slip through the forest now. Heavy patrols will be combing the area in an hour--they'll cordon us and close in. Our best chance now is to ride like the Pack of Volutio--and gamble we can beat them to the ship. So let's move out!"

Off they galloped, leaving the dead to watch silently the lightning-flecked heavens.

They had ridden perhaps an hour with no sign of pursuit. Twice more they had to break their course to bypass army posts, and Kane cursed the delay this entailed. Imel watched landmarks carefully, and concluded that they had only about another mile to travel before they could leave the main road and cut through an expanse of forest to reach the cove.

He was about to ride forward to tell Kane, who had moved slightly ahead, when the red-bearded man signaled a halt. Essen was returning from point at a gallop, and Kane wondered what the scout had learned.

A burst of lightning lit the landscape in a brief, sharp glare. In that split second of light, Kane caught sight of the large, dark-red blotch that soaked Essen's tunic--and the wind carried to his sensitive nostrils the odor of blood.

"No man wounded like that rides that well!" muttered Kane. His hand streaked for his dagger.

As his fingers closed on its hilt, the rider plunged into him. "Die--you treacherous hellspawn!" shrieked the man in Essen's tunic. His dagger flashed toward Kane's chest.

Clamping his knees against his mount's flank, Kane kept his balance as their horses collided. With a motion too quick to follow, he caught the descending arm with his left hand, halting the thrusting blade. The assailant screamed as Kane's inhuman grip snapped the bones in his wrist like brittle twigs--but the scream had hardly begun before it choked into a gurgle. Kane's other fist drove his own dagger deep into the man's belly and ripped upward in a disembowelling stroke.

The corpse fell heavily to the road, and the cloak was pulled back from his face. "That isn't Essen," observed one of the men sagaciously.

The horse on which the unknown attacker had ridden whinnied in wild pain. It rolled to its knees, then collapsed drunkenly upon the body of its rider. It kicked spasmodically for a moment and lay still. Its eyes were glazed in the lightning glare.

"His dagger cut the horse in falling," said Arbas, who had been closest to Kane.

Kane nodded. "Yes, a poisoned dagger--very pretty. They must have done for Essen, then sent this son of a bitch back for me on a suicide mission. By Tloluvín, the bastards really want me!"

He laughed bitterly. "One consolation, though. The Combine wouldn't have tried a stunt like this unless they're desperate. My guess is their soldiers at this end haven't had time to prepare for us yet."

"If they need time, we're giving them enough with stalling on our asses hem," Imel snapped. "We've like a mile to cover before we can leave the road. So let's get out of here!"

"Right--only this is going to be tense," Kane warned. "Maybe we'll be in the clear once we leave the road--but this dumb fool's friends are almost certainly waiting for us before then. So we'll have to take things slow and careful until then, or they'll get us all like they did Essen. Just pray to your gods that we can get past them before reinforcements arrive.

"So don't panic and run into something--spread out a little and watch close! Fortunately the trees are thinning out some, so there's not as much cover for them--but look sharp for anything that doesn't fit!"

They moved on slowly, feeling the gnawing terror of hunted creatures. Each moment they expected to hear the deadly hiss of an arrow. Never could a man be certain if he would draw a second breath before a hidden archer sealed his death. Muscles twitched under the painful strain. Flesh crawled in anticipation of an iron-fanged bite. Each shadow held a dozen crouching soldiers.

It was a very well-hidden ambush. Kane rode into it with almost no warning. However, the Combine

soldiers were a little too widely dispersed, and too eager to strike. In the darkness and confusion, they were uncertain as to the number of Kane's men, perhaps. As it was, they failed to use their cover to maximum advantage and struck prematurely before their trap could close.

The tense silence of the night was abruptly slashed as the ambushers' arrows stabbed through the Pellinite ranks.

One arrow skidded across the top of Kane's shoulder, deflected by the chain mail he wore. "Split off into the woods!" he roared, thankful that someone had overrated his archery skill in attempting a difficult head shot. "Surround them and force the bastards into the road!" Kane thought it unlikely that his handful of men could surround anyone, but the attackers didn't know that.

One of his band was hit in the thigh, but otherwise the volley had somehow left them unscathed. Arrows shivered past them in the darkness as they instinctively sought cover. Desperately Kane spurred his mount from the road, bellowing for the others to follow.

Weaving rapidly through the trees, they crashed into the Combine cavalry patrol. Kane felt a surge of relief as he judged the soldiers numbered less than ten, with only a few armed with bows. No wonder their old-maid's caution--this was only a vanguard of the larger force Kane was certain must be moving toward them. The surprise of Kane's break for the sea after months of inaction, while it was generally assumed he must have fled or been killed--and not knowing the size of Kane's band--worked against the Combine patrol. Now, battle cries ringing, the cavalymen galloped headlong from their ambush to meet their enemy hand-to-hand.

"Keep them apart! Don't let them form a charge!" yelled Kane, still not daring to believe that the main body of cavalry was yet to enter the combat. He lunged to parry the slash of the first soldier to meet him. Furiously they traded blows--the long curved blade of the cavalryman dancing nimbly back from Kane's massive broadsword. Then Kane hewed one mighty stroke against the other's saber that drove down the narrow blade, smashed its guard aside, and chopped through the arm that held it. The horseman had scarce time to realize his wound, before Kane's return slashed through his ribs.

Whirling about, Kane just met the charge of another horseman on his opposite flank. The swordsman was good--Arbas's opinion of the Combine's cavalry was well justified--and it took all Kane's effort to cope with the lighter blade. And now another cavalryman galloped up on Kane's other side--facing him with death from two sides at once.

Seeing his new danger, Kane swiftly reached for the battle-axe at hand on his saddle. Instead of attacking Kane's unprotected flank, the newcomer discovered too late--as had so many before him--that Kane could use his right arm with almost the proficiency of his left. Risking all on one effort, Kane slung the heavy axe around in one awful blow that no sword or shield could turn. The assailant was hurled from his horse, his chest a torn ruin.

The momentary diversion proved nearly fatal to Kane. Wrenched off balance by the heavy axe, it was all he could do to deflect a quick thrust from his other opponent. Knocked aside at the final instant, the blade still slipped under Kane's guard to smash agonizingly into his side. The mail held true and stopped the edge, but its force drove the chain links cutting and bruising into his flesh. Kane snarled in pain and relentlessly forced the other back. The soldier's guard faltered under the strain, and Kane disabled him with a cut to the shoulder. As the Lartroxian frantically sought to raise his crippled sword arm, Kane thrust his blade through his unprotected abdomen.

Sending his steed hurtling over the dead, Kane recovered his axe and turned to the battle behind him.

Three of the Pellinites were down, including the man who had been hit during the ambush. Three of the cavalymen survived. One was engaged in a ringing interchange with Imel, who was bleeding from two minor cuts on his arm and other shoulder. As Kane watched, Imel dispatched the man with a sudden thrust to his heart. Arbas was occupied with another of the horsemen in a cat-like duel, but was slowly getting the upper hand. The other Pellinite fought gamely with the remaining cavalryman in an uncertain match that Imel decided by charging the unsuspecting soldier from behind and running him through.

With a sudden burst of desperate energy, the surviving soldier of the Combine forced Arbas back in his saddle, then plunged his blade into the neck of the assassin's horse. Trumpeting in pain, the horse crumpled, throwing Arbas heavily to the ground. Landing clear of the horse's flailing body, Arbas lay dazed by the impact. He groped dully for his fallen sword. The soldier hurtled madly upon him, leaning from his saddle to deliver the decapitating blow.

Kane's arm snapped forward. His flashing axe clove through the soldier's helmet and skull to bury its razor edge in his chest.

Recovering quickly, Arbas lurched to his feet and seized the bridle of the riderless horse. Sword in hand, he swung into the gore-spattered saddle. "Thanks! Are we even yet?"

"I'm one up on you at least," grunted Kane dourly "Four of us left? Better than we deserve. We may still make it--if we don't run into any more trouble. Let's get out of here--Arbas, leave the bastard's ears on his head!"

The assassin reluctantly abandoned his trophy. With a pounding of hooves the victors vanished into the darkness as rain began to fall. Pushing their tired mounts to the fullest, they raced for the trail that led to the cove. Trees flashed monotonously by in the drizzle, and mist grew deeper with the approach of dawn. It seemed impossible that they would not miss the turn-off.

Then Imel shouted, "There it is! That's it just ahead!" Triumphantly he pointed to where an almost indistinct trail left the roadway. "We're in the clear!" He laughed. Spirits rising with escape in sight at last, the fugitives dashed for the trail.

No sooner had they reached it than shouts and the clamour of many riders reached their ears. Bursting into view and bearing rapidly down upon them was a force of fifty or more cavalry. The trap had closed--reinforcements had gathered. The Combine's indefatigable hunters had finally caught up with their prey. Clearly only speed could snatch them from death's touch now.

Kane snarled in rage. "May their wives and daughters rot with pox--the bastards have sighted us! Lead on to your craft, Imel. And ride for your life!"

The headlong flight was a panic-ridden nightmare to Imel. Hoping desperately that he would not blunder off the trail in the darkness, he plummeted through the dripping forest. Branches heavy with wet foliage overhung the path, forcing him to bend low against his weary mount's froth-spattered neck. Night-prowling forest beasts started from the path ahead and fled crashing through the underbrush. It seemed inevitable that a clutching root, a sudden trunk or branch would end the ride in plunging disaster.

The trees had thinned out barely enough to permit their rushing passage, and in the darkness this sparse cover prevented their pursuers from getting any exact idea as to their course. This alone saved them at first--and made it possible to stretch a scant head start into a respectable lead as the minutes flew by.

The horses were ready to give out, when the trees suddenly vanished altogether, and they streaked out

of the forest onto a wide gravel beach. The rain-wet stones glistened in the lightning blasts. With relief Imel discerned his ship waiting a few hundred yards offshore.

"A boat! A boat! Where's the rowboat?" he yelled, gazing frenziedly through the rain and grey mist. "I ordered them to have the rowboat at ready!"

"There!" called Kane. He pointed to where several sailors were running toward them from a beached rowboat.

"Thank Onthe! They did as I ordered!" gasped Imel jubilantly. He raced toward them, shouting, "Cast off! Cast off! Double wages to each of you for this--but damn you, cast off!"

Doggedly clinging to his kit, Kane leaped to the beach and sent his mount pelting off into the mist. Imel had picked his horses well, or they could never have made it. In mad haste they piled into the rowboat and put out from shore.

Scarcely had the boat cleared the surf when the Combine cavalry streamed out of the woods and onto the beach. The released mounts had momentarily confused them in the night. Straining mightily, the rowers pulled over the cove toward the ship, taking them out of range of the hail of arrows and curses that followed from the shore. The pouring rain served as cover, and none of the missiles reached its target.

"Goodbye, dear friends--and thanks for your most courteous hospitality!" shouted Kane and laughed derisively. "Someday I'll return to repay you in kind!"

Curses of baffled rage answered him from the mist-cloaked beach--along with floundering splashes as a few reckless ones attempted to swim after them. But the Pellinite craft was set to sail, and the Lartroxians were helpless to stop them.

Kane wiped the froth and spray from his beard and flowing red hair. He grinned at Arbas. "Well, then, so you have decided to come along after all. It seems that expediency remains your god."

"An assassin's services are in demand in any realm," shrugged Arbas philosophically.

IV

Passage to Pellin

Arbas carefully adjusted the telescope for the tenth time and squinted through the brass tube with determined concentration. Kane watched him with amusement. "Damn it, Kane!" he muttered in annoyance. "I still can't even find their frigging sails in this charlatan's toy!"

He lowered the telescope and regarded it with a frown, the powerful muscles of his lean arms twitching in eagerness to crumple the frail instrument.

"Don't!" interceded Kane in anticipation of the other's whim. "That little toy required weeks of painstaking craftsmanship to turn out, and I think friend Imel values it more highly than the jewellery he loads himself down with."

Arbas snorted and closed the telescope with callous irreverence. "Right. Our well-dressed friend likes his pretty toys. Sure don't want to piss him off. No, wouldn't want that!"

"I don't think you like Imel," Kane remarked. Arbas grinned at some pleasant thought. "No. No, I just don't appreciate the finer things, I guess."

"I don't think Imel likes you very much, either."

The assassin raised the telescope once again. He worked its sectioned tube smartly. "No. Don't think Imel appreciates the finer things, either."

"You propose a quandary."

"It's a natural talent." Arbas pressed his lips together and sighted through the lens resolutely. "Ah--think maybe I just caught a glimpse there. Yeah, the Combine of Southern Lartroxia lost its greatest philosopher when Arbas left the dusty path of scholarship for the alleys of Nostoblet."

Kane spat into the sea. "Yeah, that's what you've told me on occasion. Though when you ever graced the halls of academe is still a puzzle--unless it was to stalk some sage whose ideas offended someone with wealth."

"I was one of the most promising students of the city--a rising young star, no less. I'd already begun to gather students about me--when one day I wondered whether they must be as bored with it all as I was..." Arbas sighed.

"In the tale's last retelling wasn't there a girl..."

"All that and more. My memoirs will someday fill a shelf. Stirring adventure, ribald wit, biting social commentary, ageless wisdom. If you'll cut the sarcasm, I might feel moved to devote a volume to our lurid association."

He fumbled with the instrument, nearly dropping it into the sea. "And if this damned ship would stop pitching, I might be able to hold this diabolical device on target long enough to focus it. Why don't they carve these lenses large enough to see something through them, anyway?"

"Yeah, and I'll spend several pages telling how I carved my name in Imel's heart, for no payment other than the gratitude of my fellow man--and to the dismay of jewellers and tailors all over the Island Empire. Hey, I'm getting the hang of it now, I think. You get the object in view, then adjust the sections."

"I think you'll find the Imperial aristocracy attach considerable importance to the refinements of dress," Kane pointed out. "Prestige is extremely important to them, and a man's appearance should reflect his wealth and rank--just as their elaborate court etiquette and code of conduct is a mark of breeding. They have made a fine art of snobbery, it seems. Imel probably feels the strain of his efforts to improve his station in their society, and we have been a trifle rough with him. Anyway, he fights well enough in a scramble--so watch him. Besides, we're allies for the moment, don't forget."

"Didn't know you were an authority on the customs and mores of the Thovnosian Empire," Arbas scoffed.

"Heads up! Here comes our man now," interjected Kane, changing the subject.

The Thovnosian's spirits had improved considerably once he had escaped the pressures of his mission to the mainland. Decent food and drink, a bath, and a long sleep had driven the harassed look from his features. To be treated with due respect by his men after a week of skulking undercover in the slums of Nostoblet had bolstered his self-image, and a change to finer garments had restored a swagger to his step. With highest gratification he had watched his body-slave commit his ragged costume to the sea. Now--bathed, massaged with scented oils, his face shaved clean, his long hair meticulously combed down to his shoulders--clothed in dark green silk hose and shirt, brown woolen jacket with silver tracery, soft leather knee boots--resplendent with four costly rings, gem-set cloak pin at his throat, jewel-pommeled dagger with silver-studded scabbard and belt--now he once again considered himself a whole man, and no relation to the sixth son of an impoverished and wine-besotted petty-gentry father, who had been driven from home years back.

He sauntered across the main deck and sprang up the stairs onto the high stern deck, where Kane and Arbas stood gazing across the sea. There was hard muscle beneath the silk, Arbas conceded. Although the slender Thovnosian renegade was maybe fifty pounds lighter than the broad-shouldered assassin, he was of equal height--and Arbas had seen that he could wield a blade with dangerous speed and skill. There was a deceptive frankness about his thin face--a boyishness contributed to by clean-shaven features and a hint of freckles under the tan.

Imel nodded greeting to Kane and raised a quizzical eyebrow to the seemingly preoccupied assassin. "Teaching our landlubber to use a telescope?" he queried. He had heard with profound regret that Arbas had shown no seasickness despite a reckless appetite.

Arbas bristled. He had been to sea for several short excursions and considered himself a bit of an old salt--if somewhat unfamiliar with a telescope.

"Arbas actually is an old hand with a glass," Kane offered smoothly. "He's fascinated with the precise powers of resolution your instrument demonstrates."

"Hmmm." Imel brushed back a windblown lock of brown hair. "I thought I saw him looking through it backward a moment ago."

"I was admiring the flawless workmanship," growled Arbas, fending for himself. Though expensive, telescopes were not a rarity. But when a man seldom needs to see farther than across an alley, such devices were uncommon--and Arbas had far more use for eyes that saw all about him, rather than at great distance.

Imel discreetly dropped the matter. He gestured toward the two sails that rose in the distance over their wake. "Still following us, are they?" he observed. "If I may borrow this."

He accepted the telescope and expertly trained it on first one, then the other of the pursuing vessels. Silently he watched them, lips pursed in concentration.

He handed the glass to Kane. "Well, as you have by now observed for yourself," he glanced blandly at Arbas, "both ships are indeed Combine vessels. That lets out our other vague conjecture that they might be curious pirates."

The sails had first been sighted late in the morning. Imel had arisen at the lookout's cry, but had not, deemed the matter of more pressing importance than his own grooming. The sails had persisted into the afternoon, and from idle speculation it had become quite certain that they were being pursued.

"The Lartroxians were always an obstinate people," mused Kane. "The claws of their vengeance reach farther than I had anticipated.

"They saw us escape by ship, and so knew that we must sail through the mouth of the Bay of Lartroxia. In the darkness we slipped past any patrol vessels that waited there, but they have other ships stationed along the coastal islands. At first light of day, they must have alerted all craft within range of their signal mirrors. Knowing our point of departure, they had only to plot an intercept course for all possible routes leading out of the Bay of Lartroxia. Simple enough," Kane concluded. "All things considered, it's a bit surprising that only two ships were able to pick up our wake."

"Not so surprising considering the general ineptitude of the Combine's navy," Imel remarked--displaying a deep-water sailor's scorn for those who seldom sailed out of sight of land.

"Still, two ships discovered us," Arbas pointed out. "And to my untutored eye it would seem that they're gaining."

Kane studied the ships in question carefully through the glass. "Gaining slowly, but closing on us nonetheless," he acknowledged. "The Combine has a few large vessels in their navy, after all, and we appear to have drawn two of their finest. They're biremes--with that long, slender hull some shipbuilders are experimenting with of late, trying to design an oared vessel that's as fast as a good craft under full sail. The trick is balancing keel enough for the sail without too much drag under oars. They're carrying more sail than a bireme should--see how high their masts stand. Works great until a strong wind turns them bottom up, which usually happens if the ballast and keel aren't altered just so."

He uneasily contemplated their own small ship. Imel had picked a blockade-runner, with an eye toward combining secrecy, speed, and fighting power--in order of descending importance. His choice was a lean racing hull that was built low to the waves and displayed all the sail her design could handle. She was also fitted with a single row of oars, which could be unshipped in a calm. The crew were picked fighting men, but of necessity few in number. The pursuing biremes had easily twice their size and strength.

"I think it will be unfortunate for us if it comes to an open battle," Kane went on. "And that seems rather likely. With the wind they're slowly gaining on us. Should the wind die, they have over three times our rowing speed, at a guess. Our only chance is to lose them both in the darkness--if we can hold our lead until after nightfall."

Imel's confidence seemed undimmed. "They can't overtake us before morning," he estimated coolly. "And whether we lose them in the night or not, before dawn we'll have reached the northernmost limits of the Sorn-Ellyn--assuming the wind holds. They won't follow us very far into the Sorn-Ellyn."

"A questionable prediction, considering the Combine's well-demonstrated tenacity," Arbas commented sarcastically. "Besides which, from your lurid account I recall that the Sorn-Ellyn isn't a very lucky stretch of water to sail across. Perhaps your men would prefer to take their chances with the Combine's navy."

Imel smiled without rancour. "EfreI herself commanded me to sail across the Sorn-Ellyn. We did so unscathed on our voyage to Nostoblet; we shall do so again on our return. I have complete confidence in EfreI's wisdom in such matters. And I don't believe the Lartroxians will follow us across the Sorn-Ellyn."

Kane shrugged, having nothing more feasible to put forward as an alternative. Arbas still looked dubious.

"Perhaps, Arbas, you might care to make some sort of bet on this matter," Imel suggested suavely. "Say that prized dirk of yours against my jewelled dagger. A token bet, and I give you ridiculous odds--a blade of dubious origin against one set with gems of obvious value."

Arbas ran his finger along his long mustaches in thought, not wanting to permit the other to outface him. At length he shook his head. "No. No, I don't like that bet. To my way of thinking, a knife's worth lies in its blade and not in a garish hilt. I've seen pimps in Nostoblet who'd be embarrassed to wear that thing. But aside from that, it occurs to me that if I should win the bet, it is most unlikely that I'd live long enough to enjoy my prize."

"I hadn't thought you so cautious," chided Imel. "We shall see in the morning, though."

The remainder of the day passed uneventfully, with the Combine ships gaining enough on them by nightfall to discern with unaided eye their double-tiered oars. Still the wind held for them. The Pellinite blockade-runner sailed unerringly toward the ill-famed Sorn-Ellyn.

After darkness hid their pursuers from view, Kane sat up for several hours drinking wine and throwing dice with Arbas. Neither man gave full attention to the game, though, as their ears were strained to catch the first sounds of the biremes closing in on them in the night. Their craft ran without lights, a black arrow in the starless darkness. In the distance the lights of the biremes bobbed up through the mist now and again. They were on a converging course with the blockade-runner--and gaining.

The game at last broke up when Kane forgot what his previous point had been, and Arbas was at a loss to remember as well. Arbas stoically collected his small pile of winnings and left for his hammock. Kane was in a dark mood and remained on deck with the wine. At length he lay aback on a mound of rigging and spare sail, and lapsed into a fitful sleep.

His dreams were troubled, but he slept on without ever quite returning to full consciousness. Then toward dawn he started suddenly from his dreams--uncertain what had been going through his mind, not knowing why he had awakened. There. His hand closed comfortably about his swordhilt. Again the sound. From far off in the night it came.

The creaking of timber? The shouting of men? He concentrated on the sound. No. It sounded more like the splintering of timber. Voices howled in terror. Sounds too dim to distinguish. And silence.

Silence.

In alarm Kane reeled to his feet. The wind had died with the approach of dawn. Above him the sails hung limp, listlessly rippling with a vagrant night breeze. Kane considered arousing the ship to man the oars, but discarded the idea. The Combine vessels would be in a similar position, and in the darkness the sound of oars would give away the position of the first ship to utilize them. Presumably the watch had already informed Imel, and he had reached a similar decision. Perhaps they might drift awhile until dawn. Then they could at least appraise their position.

He lay awake, watching for the first light in the east. After maybe an hour the sky began to turn grey, and he went to the rail grimly. Hearing shining and scraping on the deck behind him, he turned to see Imel emerge from his cabin, stretching luxuriously.

The Thovnosian yawned his way over to him. Kane wondered how much of his air of unconcern was assumed. "Morning," greeted Imel. "I had the watch wake me soon as it grew light. See you beat me to the sunrise anyway. Can you see anything yet?"

Kane shook his head. Mists still obscured the waves with a blanket deeper than the night's darkness. Then the rising sun seared through, and the sea around them was empty as far as he could see in the fading mists of dawn.

"Damned wind hasn't started up yet, either," Imel observed with a curse. "That's going to mean another night on the Sore-Ellyn, unless it picks up before noon. I'll get the men to their oars."

His orders were carried out. The sleepy crew filed onto deck--grumbling that fighting men should have to do the work of galley slaves--another luxury that space had precluded. The sky grew brighter and the mist cleared. Still the sea remained empty.

The craft slowly got underway as the rowers worked her up to speed. The sun appeared and climbed out of the sea. There was no sign of either Combine bireme to be seen, even after Kane slowly scanned the horizon through the telescope.

"They didn't follow us into the Sorn-Ellyn after all," Imel reminded them, after it was certain that they were alone on the ocean. "Even a Lartroxian's persistence must have a limit, it seems. Efrel once again has called the game down to the last exigency." For all his complacency, there was a note of relief in Imel's smooth tone.

"So it seems," agreed Kane softly. His full attention was directed through the telescope at that moment.

In the distance he could make out scattered fragments of wreckage. Bits of broken timbers, cargo of a ship's store, unidentifiable flotsam. It was from a large vessel--and a recent wreck, as the debris would have drifted far apart before long. There were no bodies floating in the tangle.

But there was nothing to run aground against here in the Sorn-Ellyn. Could the biremes have collided? A simple collision could not have splintered the hull into insignificant fragments. What then?

Kane handed the telescope to Arbas. He doubted that they would again catch sight of pursuing sails.

V

Gods in Darkness

It was late at night, and all aboard ship slept soundly, when the seaman on watch saw standing at the rail a dark figure in a hooded cloak. Glad for the companionship on this lonely night, he joined him there in silence. The other's face was hidden in the shadow of his hood, so the watch was uncertain as to the tall stranger's identity. He pondered little over the mystery as he leaned on the rail, looking out over the nighted ocean.

A strong breeze was sending the ship knifing over the foam-flecked black waves, rippling water that coldly reflected the pale light of the gibbous moon above. Looking up, the sailor saw only a few stars, and those gleamed evilly--like cats' eyes in the firelight. For the heavens were obscured by heavy clouds. Strange clouds--racing across the skies in the night wind, and forming fantastic patterns as they passed over the dead-white moon. Weird, titanic figures that writhed grotesquely, as if possessed with life--contorting ominously about the few leering stars and watched over by an insane moon.

"Look at the skies!" exclaimed the seaman in wonder. "Why do the clouds roll about so wildly?"

"They are gods in darkness," came the rasping reply. "And they weave the lattice of man's fate from the infinite shades of cosmic darkness. You see their shadows now--for the forces of evil are gathering in celebration of the coming days."

The words seemed cracked and distorted, echoing across eons of time and space. The seaman started at these eldritch tones, and looked around at the speaker. There was no one beside him at the rail.

PART TWO

VI

Within the Black Citadel

Approached from its northern coast, Pellin was a dark, forbidding island. Its cliffs were sheer columns of black basalt, broken and eroded by the winds and pounding surf. Beyond the headland, the soil was thin and infertile. Trees grew sparse and stunted along the cliff, and farther inland black and gnarled trunks struggled above a forest of vines, and underbrush.

At intervals could be seen barren spots where even this vegetation refused to take root. From these wastelands strange piles of basalt gleamed darkly in the sun--weird masses of stone too regular to be called the work of nature, too unthinkably ancient to be the work of man. Cyclopean ruins that had brooded over the sea for lonely centuries.

To the southern side of the island lay the wide harbor of Prisarte, main city of the island and seat of Efre's power. The harbor was well protected, with fortifications guarding the narrow straits that opened into its large bay, now filled with many ships as Efre prepared for war. The bay itself was surrounded by dry docks and shipbuilding yards, warehouses and barracks, unlovely structures of timber and basalt, with a few lavishly constructed palaces of the nobility easily discernible.

But dominating the entire view was Dan-Legeh, black fortress of Prisarte--the looming ancestral castle of the Pellin blood since time immemorial. Dan-Legeh was a bizarre megalithic structure, whose towering walls were strangely reminiscent of the ancient ruins that haunted the desolate regions of the island. Various sections of the fortress had obviously been annexed to the original over the years. One glance might notice a tower that seemed somehow out of place; another look might reveal a wall of one construction awkwardly joined to another wall of different masonry. The additions were ancient themselves, relics of attempts to make Dan-Legeh more acceptable for human usage. They looked discordant, ajar with the original. Legend told that the fortress had stood here before man first came to the island, but Pellin was a land that abounded with such myths.

Dan-Legeh was an ominous hulking mass, silhouetted against the sunset as Kane sailed into the harbor of Prisarte. A thin wind was blowing, and the city lay under the long shadow of its fortress. Dusk had fallen by the time Kane and his associates touched shore to meet the armed escort there awaiting them. The twilight grew deeper as they approached Dan-Legeh, riding along the narrow gloomy streets to the clanking of accouterments and the deceptive flicker of torchlight. Night closed over them when they finally stood before the mighty drawbridge and barbicans that guarded the main entrance to the citadel.

An officer stepped forward to meet them as they entered Dan-Legeh--a powerful nobleman from his extravagant attire and splendid accouterments. He was tall and slender of build--with the pale, handsome features and glowing black hair of the Pellinite aristocracy. His slenderness was that of a cat--silk-smooth muscles and perfect coordination. A man beautiful and deadly as the black panther. His eyes were as expressionless as a cat's as he came toward them.

"Congratulations, Imel," he said by way of greeting, "on fulfillment of a most difficult mission. I knew our confidence was well placed. Well done."

He went on crisply, "You, then, must be Kane." He hesitated over the name, as one does in repeating an obscenity in polite company.

The two men regarded one another in cool appraisal for a moment. Kane instantly sensed a deep feeling of hatred and rivalry on the part of the Pellinite. His rigid stance and haughty mien made it clear that he had been opposed to Kane's presence in Pellin since Imel's mission had been planned. Only his mistress's command and a sense of noblesse oblige barred him from overt hostility. Kane found ironic amusement in that the first to welcome him to Pellin should be a deadly enemy whom he had never before met.

The Pellinite lord looked at him with barely restrained contempt. Their eyes met, and he hastily glanced away. His manner became more cautious--calculating.

"I am Oxfors Alremas," he announced. "My will is here subservient to none but that of Efre." He paused to let this sink in, then recollecting himself, he went on unconvincingly: "I welcome you to Pellin and to Dan-Legeh. There will be dinner served for you presently. First, though, let me guide you to your quarters. I suspect you will need to wash away the salt of your voyage. More suitable garments await you there, should you care to dress in accordance with your new position."

Biting his lip pensively, Imel watched Kane and Arbas leave with Alremas. Then, shaking his head as if to clear it, he turned to the remaining soldiers and ordered them back to their barracks. As for himself, a change to better clothes was in order as well, certainly. And then to the banquet Alremas had mentioned.

Moving away, Imel thought of wine, laughter, and the roguish company of the court ladies. He felt curiously relieved that Kane was no longer his responsibility.

VII

Queen of Night

Kane found his quarters to be of truly imperial splendour. His taste for luxury was entranced by the costly furs, silks, and tapestries that covered the spacious rooms. Gracing the chambers throughout were many expensive and beautiful statues, ornamental pieces and objets d'art that complemented the exquisitely done furnishings. And there was a fine sunken pool for bathing, in which Kane found pleasure with the lovely slave girl sent to him as a personal servant.

Dinner was similarly magnificent. The banquet was served in a gigantic firelit great hall, with countless dishes of roasted meat and cups of foaming ale or wine carried all about by scampering serving wenches. The great hall was filled with almost two hundred guests--for the most part, nobility and officers. Loud talk and laughter rose from the long wooden tables to the high vaulted ceiling.

But it seemed to Kane that the laughter was a little thin and strained; their voices held a nervous quality not wholly hidden. Moreover, the shadows in the great hall were somehow too deep. More than once his eyes caught quick traces of movement from the shadowy curtains. And throughout the meal his keen senses were aware of some hidden surveillance--one of almost inhuman intensity.

Although its place was set, the master seat of the head table stood vacant.

Kane sat at the head table with Oxfors Alremas on one side and Imel on the other. Arbas was several places down--the Pellinites were uncertain of his status, but assumed he was of some importance since he had come with Kane. Conversation with the others at the table was guarded and kept to matters of commonplace. So Kane bided his time, waiting for things to develop. Of Efrele there was still no sign.

As the meal drew to a close Alremas turned to Kane, who was just emptying his tankard. "Now that you have had a chance to recover somewhat from your journey, I'm to take you to Efrele."

Kane nodded impassively and rose to follow him. Alremas led him through a bewildering progression of stone stairways and long, winding passageways. The interior of the fortress was far more extensive than outward appearances indicated. Again Kane sensed that much of the walls and stairways were alien to the original external construction--perhaps additions made after the original portions had collapsed with age. Always the outside wall could be distinguished by its cyclopean architecture--megalithic blocks of basalt cunningly fitted. To raise such a wall would have demanded an engineering genius of a degree unknown in this age.

At length they stopped before a heavy door of iron-studded oak. Alremas knocked loudly with his dagger hilt, and the door was opened by a huge slave. The obese servant Kane recognized as the typical eunuch bodyguard of a lady's private chambers. What was not typical was that this man stood close to seven feet in stature, and his massive form hinted of considerable strength under the rubbery blanket of fat. A parang of formidable length hung in a sheath at his belt. His face was without expression.

"Leave your weapons with the eunuch," growled Alremas. He gave Kane a glowering look and strode away down the shadowy passageway.

Crossing the threshold, Kane entered a spacious anteroom--boudoir seemed an inappropriate term for such a chamber. The room was brightly lit and decorated in a bizarre fashion. It bore an obvious feminine touch in its furnishings, but there were other objects of a sinister, diabolical nature--weird paintings and bits of statuary, strangely bound volumes, unusual pieces of apparatus and alchemical impedimenta, exotic incenses and unfamiliar scents. From somewhere Kane sensed an indefinable aura of evil. It was a macabre hybrid of a sorcerer's study and a lady's boudoir.

At one end of the room was a curtained doorway. The curtain was only a thin veil, and no light shone behind it. A person watching from the room beyond would be able to observe occurrences on the other side, while he himself remained invisible.

Not particularly relishing the situation, Kane sat down and watched the curtain. He had not long to wait.

"So, then. You are Kane." The low voice from beyond the veil was an eerie one. Its accents were beautiful and feminine, but somehow distorted and maimed. It was as if the speaker had difficulty forming the words in her throat--as if the speaker were struggling to articulate a rage beyond sane expression. "And you are Efrele?" Kane inquired.

Her answer was a hateful titter. "Yes-and no! I was Efre! I suppose convenience dictates that I still be called by this name. But I am not Efre. Efre is dead. Two years dead. But I am dead--and I am Efre! Or was Efre, since Efre is dead. So where does that leave us, Kane? It doesn't matter. Yes, do call me Efre. It will do for now.

"But the dead do not always die! Beware, Netisten Maril, of the dead that yet live!" The last was a maddened shriek. Silence followed as Efre fought to control her passion.

She began again. "Yes, I am Efre. And by now Imel should have told you of my past--and something about your place in my plans."

Kane nodded. "Imel told me that you intend to avenge yourself upon Netisten Maril, and to reestablish Pellin as the center of power in the Empire. According to him, I was summoned to command your naval forces in the coming war. At this point, however, it isn't at all clear to me why you don't rely on one of your own generals for this. Oxfors Alremas seems definitely to feel the position of command should be his. "

Again laughter. "Poor Alremas. Dear Alremas. He was always faithful to me--in bed and in battle. I think he has assumed all the while that he should hold the reins of power in my new Empire--and leave my pretty hands for more delicate pursuits. It was cruel of me to indulge his conceit, don't you think? I believe he hates you for usurping the position he had taken for granted. Poor faithful Alremas.

"He comes of proud blood, though, and I'm afraid his jealousy may now detract from his usefulness. And, of course, I couldn't forgive him that transgress. But Alremas couldn't manage this task, anyway. He's better at roles that suit his feline cunning--intrigue rather than outright war. No, he couldn't be my general. Enough of Alremas. You will be given command over him, as well as command of the rest of my forces."

Alremas might have further thoughts on that, mused Kane. He continued, "But neither can I understand why you should choose me to command your rebellion--for that matter, how did you know of me? Granted, I have enjoyed some fame as a general in several campaigns within the continent east of your islands. But I have only recently come this far into the western reaches of Lartroxia. I wasn't aware that any tales were told of me in these distant regions."

"Are you so sure of this, Kane?" Efre's voice was edged with mordant mockery. "No. You know why I have summoned you. I have summoned you, Kane--evoked you as I might a demon. The people do not lie when they say I am a sorceress. It is true that I have delved deeply into the mysteries of the black arts, of the ancient gods who have not yet entirely forgotten their home of old...

"But of this you will know more later. For now it pleases me to entertain you with a story. A tale which you already know well--or the demon who whispered it to me is a liar."

Efrel's Tale

My tale goes back over two centuries, to days when Thovnos and Pellin were but two of the many disunited islands in this region. Tresli, Josten, Fisitia, Parwi, Raconos, Quamora, and all the other lesser islands--unstable independent realms and holdings. Petty kingdoms weakened and impoverished from recurrent internecine wars between the islands.

In addition to its larger land masses, this region is dotted with a vast number of tiny islands. Islands which provided countless harbors and bases for fishermen--or for pirates. Yes, there were a great many pirates here in those troubled years. For the advantages of inexhaustible places of refuge, ineffectual retaliation by the authorities, and heavy interisland commerce made this region a true paradise for their kind.

But such pirates were never much more than a dangerous nuisance--for like the islands, they were weak and unorganized. They were but jackals, stealthy killers who preyed upon the helpless and the unwary. A single well-armed escort would send the jackals scurrying to their lairs.

Then there came into the islands a stranger from the Southern Lands. He was a ruthless and deadly fighter in combat, as well as a genius at naval strategy and tactics. In a few years he built up an unassailable pirate stronghold on the rocky island of Montes. His rivals he either absorbed or destroyed. Under his formidable command was a gigantic pirate fleet established--a bloody, deadly sword that first swept the seas of commerce and soon threatened the very ports themselves.

Arrogant squadrons of the pirate fleet prowled the seas at will, attacking any ships that they encountered. Spies in every port kept them informed of the merchants' shipments and of their desperate countermeasures. No secrets escaped the pirates. No convoy was too well guarded for them to dare. Even the largest warships of the islands' rulers fell prey to them, and it invited certain disaster for any vessel to venture away from its harbor.

Eventually the pirates had the sea to themselves, for not even a fishing boat risked leaving its port. The sea-wolves had driven away their prey. It seemed that the pirates must now disband and seek more prosperous sea lanes elsewhere, but their leader had more ambitious designs than this. With the seas barren of commerce, he drew his fleet together and turned his might against the cities of the coast. Now he struck at the very sources of the riches he had plundered upon the sea.

Out of the night, his ravening fleet would sail into some sleeping port. A short battle would wipe out all organized resistance, and the city would be his to plunder. Then with ruthless efficiency was the stricken seaport utterly despoiled of its wealth. His pirate hordes would overflow the streets with bloodshed and rapine--taking whatever they wanted in booty and women. When the city was sacked, they made a pyre of their carnage and sailed into a dawn reddened from its blazing ruin.

And the man who commanded the pirates--the man whose evil genius had forged this awesome weapon of destruction--he was named Kane.

But the success of the pirates was ultimately to prove their undoing. The warring island lords at last realized that they were in extreme danger from Kane's pirate empire. Forgetting their private quarrels, they followed their enemy's example and united themselves under one overlord--the house of Pellin,

chosen because of its prestige and power. The new Empire gathered together its scattered forces and pieced together a fleet powerful enough to challenge the pirates. After long and inconclusive months of skirmishes and chase, the Imperial fleet under the command of Netisten Ehbuh of Thovnos attacked Kane on the sea before his pirate stronghold on Montes. The fighting was vicious and the issue long in doubt--for both admirals were brilliant commanders, and it was evident that the fate of the islands would be decided by this desperate battle. Throughout the day the struggle raged across the sea, but as the evening approached, the vastly greater numbers of ships and fighting men that the Empire could draw upon swung the balance of battle.

Realizing he was too badly outnumbered to continue the fight on the sea, Kane withdrew the shattered remains of his fleet into the harbor of his cliff-top fortress. The siege that followed wore on for hard and bloody days, but the catapults and trebuchets of the Empire gradually smashed down the stronghold's defenses. At a fearsome cost in lives, Netisten Ehbuh forced his way into the devastated citadel, and in one final deadly battle the grim survivors of the pirate horde were slain.

The battle was a costly one for the new Empire as well, and many noble lives met red doom at Montes--including the principal lords of the house of Pellin. Thus was Netisten Ehbuh able to usurp control of the new Empire for himself and his line--for there were none to oppose the hero of Montes among the surviving aristocracy. And so the usurper line of Netisten has sat upon the Imperial throne for all but the infancy of the Empire's existence--stealing the throne that rightly belongs to Pellin!

And a most curious thing was discovered after the last of the pirates had fallen. Although many soldiers had seen Kane fighting alongside his men up until the very end of the final battle, his body was never discovered. No trace of Kane was ever found, even though the victors searched meticulously through the blackened ruins and crimson heaps of the slain for his body. Some maintained that Kane's men had hidden his corpse to save it from dishonor. Others laughed at this conceit and argued that the pirate lord must have escaped through some secret tunnel, slipped past their lines and sailed away from another part of the island.

It was strange, to be sure. For years thereafter, those who dwelt beside the sea still felt the gnawing fear that one night Kane and his black fleet would return to wreak bloody vengeance for his defeat at Montes. Even today his name is a curse--an anathema of evil, terror, and rapine.

And so the dread name of Kane the pirate lord has merged into the dark legends of our people. A demonic figure was this Kane of old. His past was shrouded in rumors and myth even in his lifetime, and his death could never be proven. He flashed through our troubled history like some all-destroying comet, appearing suddenly from the blackness of night and as abruptly vanishing to regions unimagined: Men told that Kane was a giant in stature, more powerful than ten strong men. In battle no man could stand before him, for he fought with a sword in either hand--wielding easily weapons that another warrior could scarcely lift. His hair was red as blood, and he feasted on the still-beating hearts of his enemies. His eyes were the eyes of Death himself, and they cast a blue flame that could shrivel the souls of his victims. His only delight was in rapine and slaughter, and after each victory his banquet halls echoed with the tortured screams of captive maidens.

Of course, these legends grew wilder and more luridly exaggerated with each retelling. But histories and accounts written at that time speak of the dread pirate lord with superstitious awe, and their authors credit him with almost superhuman attributes. And though they curse and vilify Kane as the most evil man of the age, they nonetheless record with grudging admiration his indomitable prowess in battle.

This much is commonplace--old tales that all of us have heard as children. But I have powers at my command beyond the frightened dreams of the common folk. You have heard their whispers. Know then

that I hold power over the demons of darkness, whose wisdom is not blinded by the cringing frailties of the mortal mind. On countless nights have I summoned forth these creatures of an alien plane--commanded them to obey my will, listened as they whispered to me knowledge that has been eons--hidden from the minds of man. And they have told me many strange secrets.

It was of a certain demon from beyond our stars that I demanded to be told the name of the general who would surely lead my forces to victory in the coming war. My lovely demon that night told me that the triumph or failure of my vengeance hung balanced upon forces so powerful as to defy control or even prediction by a creature of its plane. But as I pressed the demon to obey my commands to the full limit of its powers, it was forced to name to me the man who could best aid me in my revenge.

The name that the demon snarled was Kane.

I cursed the creature then for its mockery. And cringing from my fury, it fawned and cackled to me of certain secrets that no other man in all our Empire has ever known. The demon told me of the fate of the pirate lord, Kane, after he fled the defeat at Montes.

Those who knew the pirate's cunning had guessed well. For this Kane of old did not die at Montes, but had escaped the massacre to sail away into the West with the last of his reavers. Across the limitless Western Sea Kane wandered, to spread his curse through many a strange land upon its far shores. And as the years passed and his enemies grew old, this Kane mysteriously remained young. For by means of a curse to which my demon gave only vague hints, Kane the pirate lord had escaped age as well as death.

Thus while new generations trod the inescapable path from womb to grave, Kane lived on to wander the earth. In the Empire his dark fame became legend, and from legend melted into myth. But more incredible than any myth--none of us has ever dreamt that our ancient enemy yet stalked the land. More than two centuries have crept past; and none ever guessed Kane's secret. And now--so my demon swore to me--from out of the East, Kane has returned to our shores.

It was of you the demon whispered, Kane! You are the man my demon named as the general I must have to achieve my vengeance! And by oaths it dared not perjure, the demon swore to me that in Nostoblet I would find the same man who brought terror and death to this region two centuries ago.

And thus, Kane, I know beyond doubt that it is the Kane of dread legend who stands before me now!

If Kane was surprised, he gave no sign of unease. His only acknowledgment was a slight nod and a trace of a cold smile.

"You carry your years well, Kane. You seem unchanged from the descriptions these old volumes give of you."

"Rather colorful descriptions, from your words," Kane commented sardonically.

"Then you are that same Kane of whom so many fearsome legends tell!"

"You have already told me this yourself."

Efrel laughed at her cleverness. But there was no mirth in her sudden command: "Gravter! Kill him!"

Startled by the unexpected death sentence from beyond the veiled doorway, Kane whirled from his seat

to meet the sudden danger. All the while his mistress had spoken to her guest, the huge eunuch had stood motionless in the shadow at his post by the door. At her command Gravter tore the heavy-bladed parang from its sheath--leaping for Kane's back as Efre's words yet hung on the air. His thick-upped mouth gaped wide in a silent shout of murder-lust.

Cursing his own weaponless state, Kane had just enough time to recognize the danger--then Gravter was upon him. The colossus of rubbery flesh was a blur as he charged, his parang swinging down in a drawing arc. With quickness that belied a man of his bulk, Kane slipped past the slashing blade and kicked the eunuch's legs from under him. It took Gravter a fraction of a second to regain his balance--time enough for Kane to snatch up a heavy silver candlestick.

Eyeing the candlestick, Gravter moved confidently. Warily the two combatants circled in a fighting crouch, poised to strike or retreat at any instant. The eunuch feinted, and Kane swung the candlestick clumsily to meet his threat. Eyes derisively crinkled, Gravter opened his mouth and uttered a bizarre coughing hiss. Within his slobbering jaws remained only the gnarled and blackened stump of his tongue. Again he made a feint, which Kane, distracted by the mutilated mouth, again parried awkwardly.

Certain of his adversary now, Gravter swung his curved blade for Kane's belly. But Kane was no longer there. With bewildering speed he sidestepped the duped eunuch's stroke and lashed out cobra-quick with the candlestick. The silver club clashed against the hilt of the heavy knife, ripping it from Gravter's benumbed fist.

With the hideous croak of a tongueless man seeking to voice his rage, the- eunuch grappled with Kane--who foolhardily flung the badly bent candlestick after Gravter's parang. Although a castrado, Gravter was powerfully muscled, and he had been trained to perfection for his duties as bodyguard. Many times the towering giant had broken men with his bare hands for the amusement of his mistress. Massively built, a skillful wrestler--any ordinary man was doomed once caught in Gravter's blubbery grasp. But as the eunuch wrestled now with Kane, he encountered a man far more powerful than any he had been pitted against. Sweat trickled on Gravter's near-naked body. Desperately he sought to crush his adversary beneath his 350 pounds of muscle and bone and rubbery bulk.

A statue would have been easier to wrestle down than the iron-muscled fighter Gravter now contended against. Displaying a master's knowledge of wrestling holds, Kane broke each grapple Gravter attempted--and only the eunuch's oily flesh enabled him to wriggle free from Kane's clawing grasp. Strips of skin tore away, as the two surged together. A sudden twist, and Kane wrenched Gravter's arm behind his back in an irresistible vise. Gravter struggled helplessly, one arm rendered useless, as Kane bore him to the floor. A muffled snap. Gravter convulsed. Grimly Kane broke the eunuch's other arm, and his hopeless groan of animal pain was the loudest sound uttered throughout the tense struggle. Ignoring the grotesque flailing of the castrado's twisted arms, Kane seized Gravter's fat throat in his mighty left hand and slowly strangled him.

Contemptuously tossing the corpse aside, Kane came to his feet and moved toward the curtain--his bloodlust thoroughly aroused, his eyes blazing pools of blue hell.

Efre's insane laughter greeted him. "Easy! Softly now! You have just proven your identity to me, Kane! It is said in the legends that your hands are your deadliest weapon--they called you Kane the Strangler, along with many other lurid names. Peace now! I only wished to test the old tales for their validity. I have no use for a legend whose prowess has been exaggerated out of all proportion--no matter if he is seemingly deathless."

Kane smiled humorlessly, his mood as dangerous as an enraged tiger's. "Well, your curiosity is satisfied.

You know who I am. So now let's have a look at you!"

He ripped aside the veil...

...and looked into horror.

Efrel lay tittering on a couch of costly silks and precious furs--their luxurious beauty utterly defiled by the hideousness that lounged upon them. The mistress of Dan-Legeh was a maimed, broken caricature of a woman--evil malignancy taken material form. A black aura of vengeful malice exuded from this twisted monstrosity, made all the more loathsome by her jewels and gown of green silk.

Hanging from the wall above her couch was a nearly life-sized full-length painting of another woman. The lady of the painting was one of the most beautiful that Kane had ever seen. She reclined upon a fur-strewn couch, seductively attired in the filmiest of silk veils. Her skin was a luminous white, her figure a compelling synthesis of feminine loveliness and licentiousness. The artist must have spent weeks seeking to portray the exquisite delicacy of her face, the dark glowing eyes, the silken black hair.

The girl in the painting, and the girl on the couch before him. Perfect beauty and mutilated depravity. It was a mind-destroying contrast of absolute extremes. And in one awful moment, Kane understood that both of these women were Efrel.

She had been tied by her wrists, so that her arms were relatively unmarred--at least no bone was laid bare. The remainder of her entire body was hideously scarred. Her flesh was but shapeless masses of twisted tissue; in places pallid bone shone beneath the expanses of scar. Jagged stumps of rib poked through her side, where flesh had been stripped bare by her ride. One leg was amputated just below the knee, torn away or too maimed to be salvaged. On her other leg, her foot was no more than a flattened stump below her ankle.

Worst of all was her face. It must have dragged the earth after Efrel had lost consciousness. Long strands of black silky hair grew from the few patches on her scalp that were more than just splotches of scar tissue. Most of the flesh of her face had been scraped away; her ears were scraggly stumps of gristle, her nose but a gaping pit. Efrel's difficulty of speech was easily accounted for. Her cheeks had been fearfully lacerated, and her mouth was drawn into a shapeless slit that was unable to cover the broken bits of her teeth. One eye was horror, the other worse because it had been unmarred. This one dark eye was still beautiful in this hideous travesty of a human face--an onyx in a maggot pile.

The creature called Efrel should not be alive; clearly no human form could survive such mutilation. Yet she lived. And the malevolent force of vengeance that somehow kept her living blazed forth insanely from her one eye--an eye which looked straight into Kane's eyes without flinching.

Kane stared dispassionately at the horror on the couch, his manner portraying no emotion other than urbane curiosity. He laughed mirthlessly. "Yes, I am Kane. And I see that you are Efrel. Now that we have introduced ourselves, who have you summoned me to Dan-Legeh?"

"What? Business? So soon?" tittered Efrel, all shackles of sanity cast far aside. "Why do you speak to me now of business? See! You are in the intimate bedchamber of the Empire's most beautiful lady! See me there on the wall! See me here before you! Have I changed so? Do you not find me beautiful still? Am I not the most lovely and desirable woman your eyes have ever beheld? Once I was!"

"Compared with what lies within your flayed carcass, you are still a beautiful woman," Kane thought aloud, revulsion rising within him.

Another burst of insane laughter. "So gallant, Kane? But I know the evil that lurks behind your eyes! And we are two of a kind, you and I! Mated in evil!"

She opened her arms to him. "Come, Kane the pirate! Come, Kane the Deathless! If you are truly to take Alremas's place, remember that he was once more than general to me! Come, Kane, my lover!"

Kane went to her side. The tattered lips writhed against his.

On the floor, the dead eyes of the strangled eunuch watched in horror.

VIII

Conspiracy in Prisarte

Sipping sweet wine from a splendid crystal chalice, Kane thoughtfully looked over a number of closely written sheets of parchment. The body of Gravter had been carried off, and another attendant stood watch beyond the door. Kane's sword hung at his belt once again, as Dan-Legeh's macabre mistress had altogether accepted him into her confidence. Efre, Kane sourly mused, was fully satisfied with him.

Now she emerged from her bedchamber to bring another stack of papers to the lamplit table where Kane sat. For all her broken limbs and maimed flesh, Efre was not bedridden. To the stump below her right knee was strapped a bizarrely carved wooden leg. Set with costly gems and embellished with strange carvings, it resembled a demon's forepaw from some drugged nightmare. Thus Efre was able to walk about, although her task was difficult, and she required the aid of a cane to hobble for any distance.

She extended the papers to Kane triumphantly. "Here are a few other documents that will interest you: lists of the ships of war under Marin's command, the numbers of fighting men he can muster, secret pledges of fealty to me from various lords, the current status of my own forces--all these things are tabulated here. Wouldn't Maril give a fortune to read it!"

Kane glanced up from one of the statements. "You've done an extraordinarily thorough job here of gathering and assimilating information--excellent work in accounting for your own preparations, as well as in finding out your enemy's strengths and weaknesses. I'm impressed."

Efre made what might have been a smile. "Yes, my spies are very efficient. Most efficient. There is little I do not know of my enemies. Where my human servants fail me, I have other means of gathering

information."

Kane's eyebrows rose slightly, but he moved on. "Yeah, so I see. Well, these show you have made thorough preparations. I'll need to study these more carefully, of course--but for the moment, just where do things stand? I mean, can you give me a quick summary, say, of the present stage of your overall plans?"

Painfully dropping into a chair, Efreil waited a moment before beginning. "It is growing late, and dawn cannot be far off. I'm tired, and so I shall make this brief. Later we can work out details together--I'm certain your own knowledge will prove invaluable in this venture."

She began speaking with deliberate slowness, her voice rising with tension at each phrase. "I have spent these past several years plotting to overthrow the usurper rule of Netisten Maril. Of the failure of my first effort, you already know. I paid an inconceivable penalty for that failure, but the gods of darkness were moved to spare their daughter for a second attempt.

"This time I have spun my web more cunningly. This time I have summoned to my command forces powerful beyond human imagination. This time I will not--I cannot fail. I must restore the rule of the house of Pellin to this region. I must claim the Imperial throne that was predestined to be mine. I must avenge myself upon Netisten Maril and all his thrice-damned line. I must have my vengeance!"

This last utterance was almost a shriek. Her next words were whispered. "And no man, no god, no devil shall obstruct my vengeance."

It was a moment before Efreil went on. "As you see, I have prepared well for this. Yes, prepared well--and Maril still has learned nothing of my plans. I have been secretly building up Pellin's navy. Many a ship that floats at anchor in some southern harbor waits not for cargo, but for my commands. My emissaries have sought out the clandestine allegiance of many of the island lords--great lords as well as those from the lesser islands. Imel, whom you have met, is typical of my new servants--a renegade noble from Thovnos itself. Like the scions of other noble houses which have dwindled under the Netisten rule, he recognized the chance to seize the rich holdings that would restore the prestige of his blood. In some instances promises of expanded power, or of unbridled pillage and looting have brought a noble over to me. Or it may happen that some lord who hated me has suddenly died, and a secret friend to my cause has taken his place. Armies of mercenaries have given their allegiance through my proxy lords. I've even enlisted whole regiments from bands of pirates, recruited hunted criminals for my service--so you, Kane, should be among congenial souls.

"Thus, piece by piece, I have added to my forces--amassed an army of vengeance without Maril's suspicion. The exact strength that I can muster at this moment is recorded here. I estimate that perhaps as many as one hundred ships will sail behind my battle pennant--and there are many more who will join me once they have seen our initial success. Fighting men and galley slaves I can produce in the thousands, and my workers labor day and night over new arms and armor and engines of war."

"What you say is impressive, certainly," interrupted Kane. "But withal we'll be heavily outnumbered by the Imperial navy. As near as I can tell from your documents here, Maril still has the firm allegiance of the monarchs of the other six major islands in the Empire, not to mention that the majority of the smaller islands are largely under his direct control. He can easily muster a fleet three times our strength, and every vessel a first-class fighting ship. He has only to call upon his lords to render to him the support that they are pledged to give their Emperor. And in manpower we're even worse outstripped."

Kane scowled at the sheaf of documents. "Hell, if Maril scrapes the bottom of the barrel the way you

have, he can command better than four times our number of ships, and man them better, too. As I found out once before in these islands, no amount of daring and ingenuity can conquer an enemy whose resources are vastly superior to your own. It ultimately has to come down to human terms--man against man--and in the final balance the stronger force will be victor and the weaker will be dead."

"Of course!" Efre dismissed Kane's forebodings. "But as I have told you, I have more than human powers at my command. These scribbled sheets of parchment do not hint of the hidden forces that I shall unleash in good time--but only at the proper moment may I do so."

She paused to relish Kane's obvious curiosity.

"Listen, Kane! See to the organization of my mundane powers. I know you have the genius to forge these disparate fragments into a fighting unit--an army that shall conquer despite our inferior numbers and my thrown-together fleet. Your reward for this victory will be a kingdom--power in the Empire second only to my own.

"Only see to your army, and don't speak to me of balances and of odds. For I tell you, Kane--when the time comes to strike, I can turn the tides of war for us! No man dare guess from what secret realms Efre shall summon forth an irresistible power. They who shall answer my call will smash aside any petty advantage Maril may have over us in numbers and strength."

Kane pounced to draw her out. "You interest me. What manner are these supernatural powers that you claim to command? If they are so potent, why do you need me?"

Sensing his challenge, Efre again became evasive. Her nightmarish face assumed a vague interpretation of a cunning smile. "Later, Kane, when it is time to take you into my fullest confidence. Later I shall tell you all. But now the dawn breaks: "

IX

The Prisoner in Thovnosten

There exists an unmistakable aura about a prison cell. A man blind and deaf can sense this quality, even though he cannot see the walls and bars, or hear the curses, the pleas, the rattle of chains. The prison may be a filthy hole buried in some forgotten dungeon; it may be a royal suite offering every convenience and luxury. Regardless of its station or the range of accommodation, every prison denies its inmates two priceless rights--freedom and human dignity.

For every prison there stands some form of barrier--a rusty chain, a mouldering wall, a surly guard, or perhaps only an obsequious but adamant attendant at the door. Some definite barrier imposes its will upon the imprisoned and says to him This far you may go, but no farther, this much you may do, but nothing more. As surely as a prison robs a man of his freedom to choose for himself his movements and actions, the same does it strip from him his dignity as an independent individual. And from this denial arises that characteristic rancid atmosphere which every prison exudes--an invisible miasma of tension, compounded of hatred and fear, apathy and pain, frustrated hope and inexpressible despair.

M'Cori sensed this. Her heartbeat raced in subconscious panic as she followed the guards, and she breathed rapidly as if the air were growing stale. It was stale, she thought uneasily. No fresh air, no sunlight, no companionship--a lingering death by suffocation. Shivering, she repressed this painful line of thought As she descended the stairway, she gathered close the vagrant folds of her silken gown, dreading that a touch might absorb some intangible taint from the stones. She wore a light cloak about her white shoulders, although the bodies of the guards showed beads of sweat outside their dirty harness.

A half-dozen guards waited vigilantly outside the heavy door that opened into an underground room from which there was no other exit. They stood with weapons ready, suspiciously awaiting the approach of the others. A challenge was sounded and answered. The newcomers advanced, and the guards relaxed somewhat as they recognized the daughter of their Emperor.

"He's been asking for you, milady," explained the captain courteously. He peered through the tiny barred spyhole in the thick door. Inside were posted four more guards. "It's all right. Open her up!" he ordered them. "The Lady M'Cori has come to pay a visit."

The captain of the guard thrust his keys into the two massive locks on his side of the door, while from within heavy bolts were pulled back. The door swung open ponderously, and the guards within stepped back to allow their captain to enter the antechamber. Another key turned the lock on the door of thick bars that good inside. The guards watched tensely as this final barrier creaked open, but of the inmate of Thovnosten's most secure cell there was no sign.

The captain held the door. "If you please, milady, no more than half an hour. Your father's orders, you know."

Nodding halfheartedly, she crossed the threshold. Again she experienced that same tremor of trapped hopelessness, and she wondered if ever again they two should meet beyond its chill shadow. She called softly, "Lages?"

The room was silent--in subterranean darkness but for a single lamp and the torches outside. It was spacious enough so that much of the chamber was lost in shadow beyond the flickering light. As her wide eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, M'Cori could make out the spartan accommodations of the cell.

For this cell was no dank pit where prisoners were left to rot in chains, although no man had escaped from here in all the dungeon's long history. This was a very special cell. Here the monarchs and emperors of Thovnos chose to incarcerate political prisoners whose threat to their established order demanded that they be imprisoned beyond hope of escape--yet whose rank required certain considerations and privileges. Death was a more certain warden, but it was often expedient to confine a popular figure herein--until public sympathy waned, and his demise could be handled discreetly, conveniently.

M'Cori thought she could discern a still figure stretched upon the chamber's narrow bed. She moved closer, a note of alarm rising in her voice. "Lages?"

The figure on the bed started as she stepped close. He gasped hoarsely and blindly struck out at her. M'Cori cried out, as a powerful blow of his arm slammed back her hesitant touch.

The youth shook himself awake. "M'Cori!" he breathed. "It's you! By Horment, I'm sorry I startled you, M'Cori. I was in the midst of a nightmare and I..."

His voice trailed off as he haphazardly brushed his fingers through his disordered brown hair and wiped the cold sweat from his stubbled face. He fumbled for his water jug.

"Hate to strike a light, darling--I'm such a mess," he apologized. "Didn't really expect you until tomorrow, or I would have straightened the place up. Hey, what are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

His voice became edged. "M'Cori! Don't hide anything back! Have they...?"

She hurried to his side, cutting short his sudden panic. "No, Lages! Stop it, please! Father has decided nothing yet. Nothing has changed."

Her eyes clouded. "Lages, it isn't night. It's the middle of the day."

Lages cursed and swung to his feet. "Wait--I'll strike some more light. Middle of the day, do you say? Damn it, I've slept too long again. Wait--I'll make it day down here, too. High noon, if you like. I'm getting to be a vegetable down here, damn it all--a mushroom. Day, night, what difference! I eat when I'm hungry, I sleep when I'm tired. Lately I'm not too hungry, so I sleep most of the time. Someday I'll just not bother waking up, and I'll snore away here until the world outside has long forgotten Lages. There! Two lamps for morning, three for noon, and I'll blow one out for evening. Midday, you said--that means all three."

He turned to her then and saw the horror reflected in her face. Uneasily Lages realized that his words were bordering on a lunatic's raving. He straightened his rumpled clothing and muttered reassuringly, "Forgive me, sweetheart. That nightmare still has my nerves all shot to hell. Get used to talking to myself down here, and I forget how to converse intelligently."

He smiled crookedly, and she brightened hopefully. "Sorry if I frightened you," he went on, trying to push away the nightmare.

The nightmare that haunted him with every sleep. The nightmare of the young man who lay trapped and helpless in his cell--who cowered like a whipped slave in a dark corner, as he heard the footsteps of his executioners marching closer. Closer, ever closer. Never quite reaching the door--before the slave began to scream in spineless terror. And then Lages would wake up, screaming.

Someday the footsteps would reach the door and enter. Someday he would not wake up. He shuddered. It was degrading enough to have to wait here, wait to be led out and slaughtered like some condemned felon. But to be tormented by the fear that his enemies would find him groveling on the floor...

He knew he did not fear death. Even so ignominious a death as doubtless lay in store for him. Distasteful. Something to be fought, to be avoided as long as possible. But he did not fear death. Then why the nightmare--why the dreams of cowardice? Could any man say for certain how he would ultimately face death? His captivity was eating away at his mind. Perhaps his manhood was rotting away

as well. Maybe in another month--or another... For the thousandth time he cursed the fate that had let him be taken alive by his enemies.

The cell was no longer silent. Someone was speaking. Speaking to him. It was M'Cori. Gods, he had all but dismissed her from his thoughts. Hoping she had not noticed his withdrawn silence, Lages started to smile--and realized he had been smiling blankly for several minutes now. Had she noticed? She appeared not to have. Was she then behaving discreetly toward one whose mind was starting to wander? He forced himself to concentrate on her nervous account of the past week's court gossip, of a newly arrived troubadour, and similar inanities.

She sensed that he had returned to her, and cut short her chatter--looking toward him anxiously. Outside the barred doorway, the guards stood impassively. Lages wondered if Maril enjoyed hearing their reports of his increasingly disordered conduct.

"Has your father made any further mention of me?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

She shook her head solemnly, rippling the waves of blond hair. He noticed her perfume for the first time and remembered that he should have complimented her on her appearance. Clearly she had spent hours planning and preparing for this half-hour. She was gowned and groomed as if to attend a banquet. He wondered if it were too late to express his appreciation--without giving her the impression he hadn't noticed earlier. He decided it was not.

"No, Father pretends that he has forgotten all about you. Never does he mention your name. It's his favorite trick when anything happens that disturbs him deeply. Darling, I'm sure he means to spare you. Why else would he have kept you alive these last--?"

"These last two months," Lages finished for her. "There's any number of reasons, but don't worry yourself over it. After all, I've lasted two years under Maril's thumb, and I'm still not down."

But damn close to it now, he told himself. Third time is the last.

Lages had been at sea while Efreil was weaving her conspiracy with Leyan, and consequently he had not been implicated in the plot. Certain of his son's loyalty to him, Leyan had postponed involving Lages until the final moment. Thus the first knowledge Lages received of his father's tragic fate came when he returned to port, and his fellow officers reluctantly declared him under Imperial arrest. Showing unwonted mercy, Maril did not execute Lages with the others of the conspirators' households, but chose instead to keep him under careful surveillance.

Enraged over his father's death, Lages had recklessly plotted to kill Netisten Maril. His abortive conspiracy had never a chance to take form, and Maril this time placed Lages under genteel confinement. He imprisoned his nephew within a suite of rooms inside the Imperial palace, extracting from Lages his solemn promise to engage in no further conspiracy against his uncle. Again the Emperor departed from character to show mercy.

With the help of some friends, Lages made a daring escape from his gilded prison. Gathering together a number of his uncle's enemies, Lages this time organized an almost successful attempt to assassinate the Emperor and seize the throne. In his hatred of his uncle, Lages gave little thought to the fact that he was being used by powers whose only ambition was to gain control of the Empire for themselves. Using Lages for a figurehead, his fellow conspirators had developed a considerable popular following for the fiery youth. Again Netisten Maril had crushed the conspiracy, and Lages once more became his prisoner.

But this time there was to be no escape for Lages, no one that he could turn to for help. He was buried alive. Only M'Cori was privileged to visit him, and she would never betray her father--or so Maril believed. The weeks had dragged by, while Maril ferreted out the last of Lages's co-conspirators. And Lages knew that this time Netisten Maril would grant no reprieve to the nephew who hated him.

"I brought you a few things," M'Cori was saying. She held up her basket with the delighted air of a child bestowing treasured gifts upon a favorite playmate. It was this ingenuousness--this ability utterly to divorce herself from her surroundings, from reality, to draw others into her enchantment--that made him love M'Cori, so Lages told himself.

"A sword and a set of keys, I hope," he said with unconvincing levity.

M'Cori flashed a smile. "I'm afraid your guards confiscated that along with the battle-axe I had tucked away in my coiffure."

She blushed nicely as he took this chance to pay some painfully awaited compliments. "They missed the magic ring of invisibility I slipped into my décolletage, though," she added wickedly.

"Where is it, then?" he asked.

"I can't find it myself now," she laughed. "It's charm must work too well."

"Might I help you search for it?" Lages suggested. M'Cori kicked at him playfully and reached into her basket. Lages caught the secret promise in her averted eyes, though this was hardly the time and place. '

"Here," she said, extending a heavy flask. "I stole a bottle of Father's imported brandy from his most secret cellar bin."

Lages sighed his appreciation. "What other surprises, little magician?"

"Well, here's a book. I thought you might want to read."

"What sort of book?"

M'Cori kept her eyes lowered as she proffered the opulently bound volume. "Well, it's poetry. Written by Pacin of Tresli. I know you'll think it's awfully tender stuff. But it's mine. My favorite book. I read it a lot. I mean, I thought you might like to look through his poems--if you knew that I liked them and that they mean a lot to me. Then you'd have something that was dear to me. Something to keep with you while you're down here."

"Thank you, M'Cori," Lages said gallantly. "I'll read these poems over carefully at night. If it would please you, I'll even learn them all by heart. Recite them to you like your personal minstrel."

She laughed at his proposal, but there was a faint catch before she continued. "Here's one more present I brought." Carefully she reached into her basket and lifted out a small bouquet of wild flowers. Timidly she displayed the handful of colored fragrance to Lages--hoping desperately that he would accept them, terribly afraid that he would laugh, or be insulted.

"Flowers, M'Cori?" he asked her in wonder.

"I picked them with my own hands in the meadow this morning. My maids think I'm mad," she said

hesitantly. "Oh, darling, I know it's silly for a girl to bring flowers to a man! Only I keep thinking of you locked away from the sunlight down here. I thought something full of life like these flowers--I thought maybe then it would be like... like..."

"Like capturing a fragment of the sunlight and bringing it here to me," Lages finished for her.

M'Cori nodded and smiled her appreciation of his understanding. Since she had nothing more to say, she let Lages hold her close for a while. Kissing, they were oblivious to the impassive scrutiny of the guards.

She nestled her head under his chin and clung to him in silence. Lages felt each beat of her heart against his chest. He felt her relax slowly in his arms--content for the moment, like a child at rest. He wondered if she had gone to sleep, so still she lay, when abruptly she pushed away from him.

She ran her soft hands over his face in elaborate disdain. "Your face is like a scrub brush! You've scratched me to ribbons! Why don't you either scrape that mess off, or let it grow out?" She looked at him in appraisal. "You'd look sort of dashing with a full beard, you know. If you kept it trimmed neatly."

Lages started to protest, but realized she was just trying to goad him out of his apathy. Instead he told her slowly, "You're my last hope, M'Cori. I would have given up--gone mad with despair long ago, if it weren't for you."

The captain of the guard discreetly cleared his throat from the doorway. "Milady, you'll have to go now. I've let you stay almost an hour already, and your father will have my hide if he finds out."

Reluctantly she got up to leave. "I'll be back, beloved," she whispered. "And you'll get out of here--I know you will. I'll keep begging Father to parole you--at least to move you to a cell in the tower. I know he means to spare your life, Lages!"

He found himself almost sharing her optimism. "Sure, darling. Keep trying, in any way you know how. I know you're doing everything you can for me. And I'll be waiting for your next visit."

"Goodbye, Lages," she called from the door. "Don't forget the priestess's prophecy."

He listened to her departing footsteps. Yes, the prophecy. Don't forget the prophecy.

Long ago--how long ago? They were three half-wild kids on a spree at a holiday carnival. M'Cori, Roget, and Lages--they had slipped away from Leyan and run amuck through the throngs and stalls. In one dark booth they had discovered an ancient crone, who swore to them that she was the last priestess of Lato, a devil-worship suppressed decades before by the priests of Horment. She said that if they would let her taste a drop of their blood, she would tell their fortunes.

An exchange of dares had made it impossible to back out. Solemnly each had pricked a finger Roget's dagger and thrust the ruby-spotted tip in the hag's toothless mouth. She had sucked so rapaciously that it seemed their fingers would be stripped of flesh.

For Roget she forecast fame and glory as a warrior; for Lages, a kingdom to rule; for M'Cori, marriage to her dearest love, who would be a prince and would father her seven strong sons. They had left quarreling over whose fortune was the brightest, and when Leyan at last found them, he had been tremendously alarmed at their adventure. They never saw the old priestess again.

He shrugged, feeling the bitterness return. Prophecies and childhood dreams. True, Roget had found

fame and renown as a warrior, but he had encountered death as well--shot from ambush by some unknown assassin after his glorious triumph over the rebels on Fisitia.

And the man whose throne Roget had died to preserve had butchered their father. Now Lages was the rebel. And his fortune was almost played out.

Grimly Lages contemplated M'Cori's gifts. Insipid poems. And flowers. Just the thing he needed to escape this cell, this fate. At worst they only reminded him of his imprisonment here below ground.

He snatched up the bouquet in his fist and glared at it angrily. Whether he wanted to trample the blossoms into the floor, or press them to his lips--Lages could not decide.

X

The Emperor's Spy

Cassi was a hunted man. Most of his life he had been a hunted man. Childhood in the alleys of Thovnosten leads either to rapid maturity or to early death--for survival there is a merciless game whose winners are the strong and the clever. Cassi had been a scrawny child, but his mind was sharp and cunning as a rat's. This natural talent eventually established him as one of the Empire's most resourceful thieves. And when the youth had finally been captured, he cheated the waiting gallows with an unprecedented escape from the Imperial dungeons. Never again could the Imperial guard ensnare him, and his colleagues marveled at his incredible fortune.

Withal, there were a few--a very few--who knew him instead to be one of the Empire's most capable spies. For Netisten Maril had recognized in Cassi a craftiness that could render great service to the Emperor. Maril had himself arranged for Cassi's escape, once he had procured his loyalty, and the fabulous thefts that made Cassi almost legendary among the Empire's underworld were clandestine payments for some valued item of information.

Vague suspicions impelled Maril to send his spy to Pellin. He had maintained a careful watch upon this island ever since the collapse of its Queen's conspiracy. The reports he received had been purely routine, and his nephew's treason had later necessitated his full attention. Otherwise he might have felt alarm, when one by one of his spies on Pellin ceased to make their reports. Those few who did return from that island assured him that all was peaceful there, that the Pellinites were unconcerned over the death of their Queen. But Maril was no fool, and he knew that a spy was a weapon not difficult to turn upon its wielder. A great many separately insignificant circumstances throughout the Empire hinted to him that

some plot might be festering unseen. So the Emperor ordered Cassi to go to Pellin.

And Cassi found his master's suspicions vindicated.

A rumor had persisted for some months throughout the slums and waterfront dives where Cassi skulked. There was a haven, so men whispered, that promised wealth and safety for any rogue, regardless of his crimes, in return for his cooperation and obedience in some secret venture. Just where this haven was, or what was expected of them once there, no one would say. Talk was that some mastermind contemplated an Empire-wide smuggling ring, or that a newly formed pirate band was recruiting hands, or that one of the island lords sought to raise a private army in secret, or a host of other wild guesses.

Cassi's own information had tied the rumor to Pellin, so he acted on intuition and made known his interest in this refuge. On cue, the Imperial guard began making things very hot for the thief, and very shortly Cassi made contact with those who promised sanctuary and riches. He was then taken to Pellin, along with a shipload of companions who would have provided a full day of hangings in Justice Square.

On arrival they were taken to newly erected barracks that housed hundreds of other green recruits, chosen from the dregs and the gutters of the Empire's underworld. Here they were given food, weapons and equipment, and the promise of gold. To earn their keep, they were ordered to drill for battle each day. Although the pretense of secrecy was maintained, it was obvious to the dullest of them that open rebellion was planned. Talk flowed endlessly--gloating prospects of plundering an Empire, excited speculation on all aspects of the bold venture, wild conjectures regarding the sinister stranger who directed all preparations.

As soon as he found it discreet, Cassi slipped away to make contact with Netisten Maril's spy network on Pellin. After failing to turn up several of those he sought, he finally contacted one Tolsyt, who was also the chief wine merchant to Dan-Legeh.

The wineshop stank of stale vinegar and sour sweat. It had the look of an empty tavern after the bar has closed--seedy and abandoned in the stark absence of customers. Tolsyt himself looked only half the role of a fat, jolly wine dealer. He was quite plump, certainly--although a noticeable looseness to his skin hinted that he had lost a number of pounds recently. But he was not jolly at all. He was scared. And he looked as though he hadn't seen a sober day in months.

"All right, what's happened here?" Cassi demanded, as soon as he caught the frightened wine merchant alone and satisfied him of his identity. "By Lato's black heart! You people must have known something was going on in Pellin for months! Why were there no reports? Why did the few agents who returned to Thovnos never tell us a damn thing about this blatant conspiracy? And Maril has more than doubled his intelligence force here--where are all the others?"

"Dead. All dead." Tolsyt's soft voice answered simply. "By the gods, how they died!"

His words quavered. Cassi noted in alarm that his eyes were damp with tears, though his face was drained of emotion.

Cassi exploded. "Dead! Everyone dead but you! Do you expect me to swallow that line of bullshit?" His eyes were narrow; now they drew narrower. Cassi was a small man, of drab and undistinguished appearance. An asp is small and unimpressive as well, until it strikes.

The other man smiled stupidly through his tears. "Dead, yes. All but me. Just Tolsyt alone. There were a few others whom she must have bought over to her service. These few she spared so they could bear

false reports to Netisten Maril--poisoned lies about quiet, peaceful Pellin. They earned their pay well, it seems. Maybe they told her where to find their former comrades. Maybe she tore betrayal from some of the others with her hellish instruments of torture.

"If you only had seen what she did to them. She was proud hung their carcasses up before the walls of Dan-Legeh, so everyone could admire her art. Must have spent days at her sport. Flayed, burnt, broken bodies--"

"And why not you?" cut in Cassi suspiciously.

"Maril always took into consideration the chance of betrayal, you know that," Tolsyt answered. "He even employed two separate spy networks on Pellin, neither one supposedly aware of the other. And he used a few completely independent spies. And, of course, there were other agents just like me--assigned to watch over one segment of the network without anyone else knowing our identity. Guess that's why I'm still alive--no one here knew I was Maril's agent.

"She found all the others, though. All the men I knew, and Horment knows how many others that EfreI claimed were spies. Maybe her demons told her their names. I only know they didn't tell her mine. I didn't dare try to warn Maril, to try to help the others--I was afraid even to try to escape. I did nothing to give any hint of my true business here."

He winced under the other's sneer. "If you had been here, it would have been the same with you, Cassi. Watching the witch hunt us down like a weasel in a rabbit warren. Living in endless dread of the day she'd hang your shredded corpse up on the walls of Dan-Legeh."

"So you believe their propaganda that EfreI still lives?" Cassi asked contemptuously. What jest of fate had preserved this coward's worthless life, he mused, while better men had died horribly.

Tolsyt snorted in a flash of anger--the first indication he had given that some backbone remained to him. "EfreI alive? You can bet your sweet ass she's alive! That's not just a rumor they've cooked up to fire the public's imagination. Everyone here knows EfreI is still alive--no matter if no one has seen her. But it's EfreI's hand in this rebellion. Who did you think was behind this entire affair? Alremas? Kane?"

"Oh, you're a real bright one, aren't you just? Sneaking in here after all of us lie butchered. Knowing right off exactly what's been done wrong. Doubting the words of the only man who was smart enough to escape the damned witch."

Cassi scowled at the wine merchant in dubious appraisal. He needed the man, but wasn't certain whether he could rely on his help--or even trust Tolsyt. Perhaps more than luck had spared the agent's life.

"Why did no one escape the island?" Cassi demanded suspiciously.

"Few had the chance, she struck so fast. And no ship leaves Pellin except under closest surveillance--not even a fishing boat. Something always happens to ships that try to slip away in secret."

"They're all caught?" Cassi frowned skeptically. "No blockade can stop every boat."

"Out there there's worse things waiting than EfreI's navy," Tolsyt shuddered. "Candon and Mosna escaped. Stole a small boat, and sailed off into the fogbound night. I watched them leave. I saw them the next day, too. Hung up outside Dan-Legeh, all pale and bloated--and their bodies covered with

puckered gouges and welts, like they'd been whipped and branded all over. That was all anyone knew about it. They sailed out to sea one night, and the next morning they were dragged out of Dan-Legeh and hung up to feed the crows. And I don't know how many other attempts failed just the same way."

Cassi changed the subject. "What do you know about this man Kane?"

"No more than what you will have heard. Nobody knows anything much about Kane. Efrek brought him in to take charge of her rebellion. Oxfors Alremas had to step down for him, so the two are deadly enemies. Alremas is too popular and too powerful a lord to dispose of easily, and Kane is doing his work too well for Alremas to recover his leadership. Something has to break there in time."

"What about these... stories they tell about Kane?"

Tolsyt shrugged. "You mean, that people say he is the Kane of old? Red Kane the Pirate, come from the past to wreak vengeance on the Empire that destroyed him two centuries ago? For all I know, it may be true. Why not? Efrek was destroyed by the Empire, too. She still lives--why not Kane? Everything else about this conspiracy defies the laws of nature. Why did Maril ever take a sorceress to his bed?"

"Ask him when he gets here," advised Cassi caustically. "And you may be certain that Maril will be here with his fleet to destroy this cancer as soon as I make my report to him. And that I'll do just as soon as I can find a way to get back to Thovnosten--without joining your not-so-lucky colleagues," he added pointedly.

Tolsyt seemed ready to dismiss the matter. "Sure, you go on and make your report. Just swim back to Maril and tell him his late wife and a centuries-old pirate are sort of planning on pulling his throne out from under him. You do that. I'll just wait right here for the Imperial fleet to land."

Reluctantly Cassi decided he would have to trust Tolsyt. "I'll work something out. For the moment, I'm going to scout around and see what other information I can pick up. Then tomorrow, say, you are going to get us into Dan-Legeh, if Efrek really is alive, Maril will want to know."

Tolsyt's plump face blanched. "Me? Like hell I will! That's suicide! Maril paid me to spy for him, not to get myself killed. I'm through with this."

"I don't think you are," Cassi told him pleasantly. There was casual cruelty written in his eyes. "I need to get into Dan-Legeh, and since you furnish wine to the fortress, you've got an excuse to pay a visit with your new assistant. And don't even think about crossing me, Tolsyt. I know ways to make a man die horribly, too,"

"But I'm not due to make my delivery there for a week," the other protested.

"Tomorrow, Tolsyt. You've just gotten in some special stuff, and you know the chief steward there will be interested."

He turned his back on the vintner's pleading and hurried from the shop. After wasting time to check on the other agents whose names he had been given, Cassi was forced to admit that Tolsyt had not exaggerated. It seemed incredible that Maril's entire intelligence network had been utterly wiped out, but that was the case. He would have to rely on Tolsyt, then.

The preparations for the rebellion were extensive, Cassi noted, as he walked through the city. Armed men were everywhere, and dozens of forges spewed forth weapons and armor. Ranks of soldiers drilled

on several of the open fields beyond the walls, and Cassi had already learned that a number of military camps existed farther inland. The rebels must plan to strike soon, he realized, since the scope of operations had now reached a point where it was obvious that some major plot was underway. Enforced isolation and clever lies could cover up only so much. He would have to get word to Maril soon.

The harbor was filled with ships, and hundreds of workmen toiled at building new vessels and refitting old ones. He spotted some unusual construction in one corner of the harbor and decided to risk a closer look. Munching on some rather green apples he had acquired from an unwary peddler, Cassi strolled over toward the docks.

He gazed at the work in puzzlement. Workers were constructing a number of gigantic catapults, weapons of a size sometimes used to besiege cities. They were fitting these catapults into huge barges--clumsy vessels equipped with long rows of oars for propulsion. Cassi frowned. When completed, these lumbering vessels would scarcely be seaworthy. They certainly could not be rowed as far as Thovnos; and if Kane planned on using them to besiege Thovnosten, the practical course of action would be to transport the bulky catapults disassembled in the holds of his warships and set them up once landed.

It was growing late. Cassi decided he had best get back to his barracks before someone took notice of his overlong sightseeing excursion. With all the confusion here in Prisarte, it was unlikely that anyone cared--but then the Pellinites had demonstrated their efficiency at ferreting out spies.

Riders were approaching. Cassi stepped back to let them pass, and was startled to recognize Imel on one of the horses. He had already learned of the Thovnosian's treason, for Imel had been given a high rank in the rebel army. Moving cautiously, Cassi kept to the shadow of a shop awning. He had seen Imel on numerous occasions around Thovnosten, but fortunately the renegade did not know him.

On another of the horses rode a dark-haired man of rather tough appearance. He wore leather trousers, and a vest with silver conchos. Broad bands of muscle bunched on his arms and chest as the wind whipped his vest. Cassi did not recognize him.

Although the spy had never before seen him, the third rider could only be Kane. There was no mistaking his massive build--even his mount stood seventeen hands at a guess. Kane wore boots and trousers similar to those of his companion, along with a fine rust-colored jupon that matched his beard. The red hair and primitive features followed the descriptions of Kane--and one look at his demonic blue eyes removed any doubt. With a shiver Cassi looked away. He found himself wondering whether the tales whispered of Kane might not be true after all. Certainly there were many bizarre mysteries on this earth, and who could say what manner of creature a demented sorceress might summon to her aid?

The riders paused within a few yards of him, and Cassi listened carefully to hear their conversation while he idly looked over the shop's assortment of fruits.

"Seems to be coming along as fast as feasible, anyway," Imel was saying. "I still don't quite see how going to be very practical, though. I mean how much accuracy can you get on any target over maybe a quarter of a mile?"

"They'll do the job they're made for," Kane asserted. "I've seen it done a few times. True, their use is rather limited--but they're devastating when you can utilize them. Anyway, catapults are essential to any siege, so we'd have had to construct them eventually. And if we can just get the time to drill them properly, their crews can get pretty damned accurate with the things. With a fireball you don't need to be too accurate, so long as you get it to any target where it can splatter."

He shrugged. "I think we've got time to check on Alremas before dark yet. He ought to have some thoughts on how his group did during battle maneuvers at sea today. Getting hungry myself. Arbas, are those apples any good yet?"

The dark-haired man grunted. "Not much. All I've seen so far have been on the green side. But then if you like green apples, it doesn't matter. Had some orange wedges that were pretty good."

"Well, it was a thought," Kane muttered as they rode away.

As they left, Cassi selected a bunch of grapes and paid for them. The proprietor had been watching too closely this time. He wandered off in the direction of his barracks, spitting seeds as he walked.

XI

Ebb Tide and Undercurrent

The water was cold and as black as the basalt of Dan-Legeh's walls. Kane stuck his foot in it and cursed.

"Sure you know what you're doing?" Arbas inquired.

Kane declined comment. The night was starless beneath a heavy blanket of sea mist, and a cold wind made a scattering of whitecaps across the inky water. The tide was out, and the surf made a sobbing moan against the rocks where they stood. The mist was sour with the scents of kelp and stale sea. Blacker in the blackness, the towers of Dan-Legeh stabbed through the fog into the night above them.

"Just don't let some bastard swipe my stuff--and save some of that brandy for me," Kane growled, gingerly wading out into the ebbing surf. His boots and clothing lay piled upon his cloak, along the kelp-wreathed rocks of the headland. Kane's sword and scabbard waited there as well, but the hulking man kept his heavy-bladed dagger strapped to his naked waist.

Arbas watched him with a dubious expression. Shaking his head, the assassin took a long pull from the brandy flask. He was used to Kane's mad schemes, and used to seeing Kane pull them off. If this time were different, well then, he'd wait until the tide turned or the brandy gave out.

Swimming out across the mist-shrouded surf, Kane made his way toward the cliffs below Dan-Legeh.

He was confident no human eye could pick him out on a night like this, though Kane found his own course through the darkness without apparent difficulty.

When Kane reached the base of the cliffs, he dived. Salt water stung his eyes, and the cold numbed his flesh. Strands of kelp clutched at him, entangled his thrashing limbs--and it took all of his strength to swim against the sucking undercurrents. Kane was a powerful swimmer, but he knew better than to dare for long the treacherous undertow here. If he faltered, the current would drag him down to the bottomless depths of the Sorn-Ellyn--and Kane had an idea of what would welcome him there.

He dived as deeply beneath the moaning surf as he dared--swimming down until the pressure lanced his skull with intolerable agony, until the undertow sucked at his aching limbs with a current almost beyond his power to resist, until his chest shuddered with pent-up breath. There was nothing to indicate he had neared the bottom of the sea beneath the cliffs there.

Kane sensed movement far below his deepest dive.

He returned to the surface, gulping air in great gasps. His hand gripped his knife. A chill touch enwrapped his leg. It was only a trailing strand of kelp.

Again Kane sensed movement from below. Quickly he swam for the kelp-strewn rocks--scrambling onto a slimy knob to catch his breath. Behind him, the sea convulsed for an instant. Kane drew back into the cover of the seaweed and broken rocks, watching.

A head broke through the surface and stared about. Kane pressed closer to the clammy rock. Against the choppy whitecaps and the boiling surf, the face was a pale blotch. The waves about the other swimmer swirled from the passage of other shapes. The swimmer dived again, and did not return, although Kane watched a long time.

He swam back closer to the shoreline. Because he did so, Kane found the body that was wedged in the rocks.

It was a man's body, naked, looking dead or drowned in that pale, bloated manner that dead and drowned things have. The crabs had not been at their work so well yet that Kane could not examine the wounds that scored the man's bloodless flesh. Kane had once seen a man enwrapped with chains that had been heated white-hot. These wounds called that vision to mind, although closer examination showed they were not burns, but puckered gouges.

Kane left the crabs to their meal. He was chilled from more than the icy surf when he clambered back to where Arbas waited.

The assassin tossed Kane the flask, grinning as Kane turned it up. Kane's teeth chattered as he towelled himself with his cloak and struggled to drag clothes over his still-damp flesh.

"If you've had enough skinny-dipping for one night, let's go find a warm fire and a keg of that same brandy," Arbas prescribed. "I've been fighting off hungry crabs for a good hour, waiting for you to get back. What did you do--run into a pretty mermaid?"

Kane looked at him strangely for a moment; then he wrestled some more with his boots. "I did see another swimmer out there," he commented in a low voice. "I don't think she saw me."

Arbas suspected a jest. "Was she a sea sprite?"

"It was Efre!"

XII

Two Went in...

The next day Cassi bribed a sergeant to put him on sick call. Once on his own, the Emperor's spy hurried to Tolsyt's wineshop, where he exchanged his soldier's harness for a dirty smock and wine-stained apron. Tolsyt received him glumly and told him that he had picked up a wagonload of choice Lartroxian wine to take to the fortress. His breath indicated that he had sampled the vintage thoroughly. The two climbed onto the wagon seat and drove slowly through the crowded streets to Dan-Legeh, Tolsyt wearing the mien of a man driving his own funeral coach.

Still, he played his part well enough when they reached the fortress. The guards passed them through the gates with little argument and called for the chief steward, who presently came to inspect their wares. It was a good vintage. Tolsyt was a better vintner than spy, although he was too worried to haggle well, and the steward purchased the wine at a bargain price. They took their time unloading the barrels, then loaded the wagon with empty kegs--dawdling until mealtime, whereupon they received permission to eat with the kitchen servants.

Having more or less established their presence within Dan-Legeh, Cassi and Tolsyt casually took an after-dinner stroll through the fortress, talking with the servants and listening to the conversations of the soldiers. The very multitudes of people who thronged the sprawling citadel formed a cover for them. To anyone who gave them notice, they appeared to be merely a pair of loafers gawking at the sights.

Cassi beckoned his companion aside. "We'll split off now," he told him. "I want to do some snooping around the north wing and see what we can hear from the servants in the living quarters of the Pellin lords. It might get ticklish if we're spotted hanging around there, but any names or scraps of information we can dig up will be worth plenty. So keep your eyes and ears open. I'd still like to know something definite about Efre. All we've heard so far doesn't prove a thing."

"Damn it, Cassi! Let's get out of here now!" Tolsyt begged. "We've found out enough for Maril already. All the servants swear that Efre is alive and keeps to the northern wing of the fortress. Come on, we know enough. They'll kill us if they find us wandering around any farther."

But Cassi silenced his protests with threatening curses and ordered the panic-stricken vintner to do as he

was told. Tolsyt left him with dragging steps at an intersection of the labyrinthian corridors. The man was close to breaking, Cassi realized. But he would have to risk him and Cassi was quite willing to sacrifice Tolsyt if necessity demanded.

Cautiously he strode along the hallways, casting a curious eye into whatever open doorways he passed. His steps were bold, and he assumed the appearance of a man who was going about his accustomed business. Now and again he stepped behind tapestries or into open doorways, choosing to avoid confrontation with those whom he heard approaching.

He began to sense an oppressive tension as he approached the northern wing of Dan-Legeh. There were fewer people in evidence now, which only made it all the more difficult to, account for his own presence. Still he pressed on, determined to earn Maril's richest bounty by bringing him the first-hand information the Emperor would demand with regard to the conspiracy's leaders.

He rounded a corner and found himself facing two lounging guardsmen. Cassi felt the chill of their suspicious stares.

"Where the hell do you think you're headed, buddy?" one of them growled.

The small of his back was cold with sweat, but Cassi smiled ingratiatingly. "Gosh, am I glad to see you guys!" he blurted in his best yokel accent. "How does a guy get out of this place? I been walking pretty near for an hour, and I just keep getting lost. Wow, this place sure gives me the creeps! How do you guys stand it being in here all day?"

"What were you doing in the first place, buddy?" the guard continued suspiciously.

Cassi hitched his belt awkwardly. "Well, you see I was delivering a load of wine with the boss. Ten hogs-heads of that real quality Lartroxian stuff--man, it's the best you can get, too. Well, after that we ate us a bite, and the boss he sort of dozed off for a bit like he does. So I decided to take me a look at this huge palace folks is always talking about back home--so I could tell them all about it, you know. Thought maybe I'd even see some of that elegant indoor plumbing these bluebloods put in even for the servants to use, so they say."

He paused, smiling amiably--wondering whether he were laying it on too thick. He hadn't been able to bring a weapon with him in his role of a vintner's flunky--but even if he could lay hands on a sword, he knew he could never cut his way out of the fortress.

The other guardsman looked him over contemptuously, noting the wine stains that blotched his clothing. "Hell, let him go, Joren," he yawned. "Kane would skin our asses if we bothered him about this hayseed."

He glowered at the spy. "Turn around and go back, boy. This is off limits, get it? Keep left when you get to the main corridor, go straight past three cross passages, right on the fourth, then straight toward the kitchen smells. Hell, find somebody else down at that end and ask them. Now beat it, boy--and you better plan on crapping in your britches before you come looking for plumbing around the north wing again!"

Cassi thanked them profusely and slunk off. The secret pleasure of making fools of the guards compensated for their bullying treatment, he told himself. But he had been marked and warned off. Now he would have to try another avenue of approach to learn anything here. Wondering how Tolsyt fared, Cassi cut across the route the guard had directed and turned into a hallway that felt dank and disused. He hoped he might catch up with Tolsyt before the other man encountered the same pair of guards.

He was uncertain as to the exact course his companion might have taken--or even how far Tolsyt might have gone before his courage failed. When Cassi had last seen him, Tolsyt was headed down a flight of stairs, evidently intending to work his way to the north wing through the lower levels of the fortress. With this in mind, Cassi descended the precipitous stairways into the colossal citadel's foundations--marveling yet again at the immensity of this legendary structure.

Skillfully he picked his way through the maze of murky chambers and dusty corridors. Stealth was imperative in these seldom-frequented nether reaches, so that Cassi stepped into concealment to avoid meeting chance intruders. Thus, when he caught the faint scuff of furtive footsteps, Cassi was quick to slip behind an ancient tapestry.

Cassi cautiously looked down the gloomy corridor, wondering whether he was being cut off by suspicious guards. After a moment he caught sight of the intruder. It was only Tolsyt, creeping down the torch-lit passage toward him. The vintner was maybe a hundred feet from his own hiding place--but Cassi easily recognized his portly silhouette, even though the light was too poor to reveal his features. Cassi started to call out to the wine merchant--he would learn how Tolsyt had done, then decide if they dared risk further snooping. But instead of hailing Tolsyt, Cassi could only gape in terror.

As Cassi stared, Tolsyt's movements suddenly were becoming stiff and slow-paced. The vintner moved his plump limbs as if they were weighted with stone--he struggled like a man seized in quicksand, dragging himself to an uncanny standstill. Tolsyt's face was frozen in a grimace of stark terror. A hoarse bleat of fear started from his lips, became a groaning rattle as even his tongue failed him. All voluntary motion ceased. He stood paralyzed in a stance of terrified flight--trapped into helpless immobility. It was as if Cassi watched a scene from a common nightmare.

For an instant Cassi fought back headlong panic. Then there came to his ears the shivery squeal of stone and oiled metal sliding together. The torches flared brightly as a faint breeze caught their flame. A section of the musty tapestries billowed outward, disclosing a concealed door that swung open from the stones of the corridor wall.

Two figures stepped out from the darkness beyond the doorway. One, Cassi recognized as Kane, for the man carried a torch that threw light on his features and cast a hulking shadow about him. Beside him hobbled a creature who looked only remotely human. She limped along on a grotesquely carved wooden leg, most of her body swathed in clinging folds of silk. The silhouette of her body against the torchlight was vaguely feminine, but strangely deformed. When she turned her face toward where he crouched, Cassi had to stifle a cry. Cassi knew beyond all doubt that Efre the sorceress yet lived. There was one eye to remind him of the beautiful Efre he had seen at the court of Thovnosten, but the hideously disfigured, face was beyond the most depraved imagination. He only felt relief that the torchlight shone no more brightly.

She regarded the helpless vintner in amusement. "So you see; Kane, my alarm system does not fail when meddlers trespass upon my sanctuary. There's little here to tempt a thief, and after we saw the fool creeping about so inquisitively, there can be no doubt."

Efre uttered a joyful cry, like a child with a new toy. "A spy! A fat little spy! Prowling about, little fat mousie? Were you going to bear tales to your master?" She laughed delightfully. "And after I'd thought I had purged my realm of such vermin. Poor little spy. Are you frightened?"

"What spell holds him like a statue?" Kane wanted to know.

"What spell holds you, little mouse?" she mocked. "The spell of my beauty, perhaps? No, Kane. He's too shy. It's something else, I think.

"Did you not see EfreI cast her spell then?" She tittered. "But I remember now. I told you to watch my fat little spy through the peephole, while I turned his limbs to clay. No matter. Perhaps I'll show you on another day. No one else of the Pellin line has ever mastered it--but EfreI is mistress of Dan-Legeh and all who venture within my halls. It is a simple spell, but a potent one. It is quickly cast, and steals from my victim all powers of voluntary movement.

"See, my fat spy can only stand and breathe. Wait, I hear his soft little heart pounding away in its plump nest, and I think my mousie is standing in a puddle that wasn't there before. But he can move his limbs and head only as I will him to do--he is my automaton now. Were he one man or a hundred, my spell would make him dance to my command. Will you see my little puppet walk?"

"I'd rather hear him talk," Kane rumbled. "Make him tell us his mission here. Ask him who else spies on us. Where can--"

"I can make him speak only such words as I command his lips to form," interrupted EfreI impatiently. "But come, my little spy, join us within my secret chambers, where you so dearly wanted to pry. We will show Kane a game or two with my pretty toys, and soon I think you'll beg to tell us all the secrets your fat little mind holds."

"He may have accomplices here in the fortress," Kane suggested. "We should order all gates barred immediately. If you summon some of your servants, we might learn immediately on what pretext he came to, Dan-Legeh--and who else came with him. It won't take more than a few minutes to determine this, regardless of the obstinacy of his tongue--which I judge to be ready to spill over with words right now."

"Kane, at times you display a depressing boorishness." There was an insane tone of menace in the sorceress's words that silenced Kane. "Spies are rare visitors to Dan-Legeh these days. Since my last pets languished here, I've thought of several new tricks to play on them. This one will speak to us presently. But first I intend to have my sport, and I mean for you to watch."

She whispered soothingly. "Come, fat little mousie." His face still set in a mask of abject horror, Tolsyt followed her beckoning finger. With awkward steps he plodded through the doorway and into the concealed passageway beyond. Kane frowned in chagrin, but entered behind him.

EfreI's words drifted back as the door slid shut. "Dear little spy. What games shall we two play? I wonder if you were one of those who whispered of my plans to Netisten Maril a lifetime ago? Do you know how it feels to have your flesh torn from your bones? Shall we play that game, too? Poor little plump spy--I think you're frightened of me."

The closing door cut short her mocking laughter. Warily Cassi stepped out of his concealment. Tolsyt had maybe had more nerve than Cassi had credited him with. At any rate, Tolsyt had managed to reach a sector of the fortress important enough for EfreI to guard it with some manner of alarm. Clearly Tolsyt had blundered upon something--and in doing so had drawn EfreI and her henchman to investigate.

Cassi licked his thin lips. At least the wine merchant had succeeded in flushing the sorceress from her lair--but whatever knowledge he had gained was lost forever now. Cassi regretted that loss, though he felt no regret at his companion's fate--only relief that it had not been his own.

With a sudden rush of fear, Cassi realized that EfreI and Kane would soon be party to Tolsyt's every

secret regarding the two spies' operations in Prisarte. Only Efre's sadistic lusts had kept Tolsyt from spilling everything on the spot. Cassi hurried through the passageways as fast as discretion permitted. It would only be a short time before Kane had the pieces together, he knew. Had it not been for Efre's interference, Kane's men would be combing the fortress for him this very moment.

The minutes dragged by as Cassi rushed through the endless passages. Valuable time was lost in ducking out of sight to wait for soldiers to pass by, or in ambling casually along once the spy reached the safety of the kitchen area. But his luck still held.

Returning a few nods and greetings from acquaintances made earlier in the day, he eased himself onto the wagon seat. He clucked to the horses, and the wagonload of empty wine barrels rattled toward the servants' gate. The guards waved him through without interest, and there remained only the main entrance gates to pass.

The sergeant of the guard looked at him quizzically. "What happened to your master?" he drawled.

Cassi swore. "The fat bastard sent me back to haul back a second load by himself. I'll be busting a gut, while he loaf's around pinching the kitchen maids."

The guards laughed. "Well, go on, then," grunted the sergeant. "I guess you'll have to hustle to get through by dark, anyway."

Cassi let out a deep breath as he rode from under Dan-Legeh's shadow. The horses were impatient from their long wait, so he let them jog along. As soon as he reached the empty wineshop, he jumped off and raced to pull on his soldier's gear. No one noticed as he strode from the building and hurried for the docks, but he knew his time was fast running out.

He knew he must get off the island at all costs before the alarm went out for his capture. Holing up somewhere in the hills was out of the question--even if he escaped, he would have no means of getting his information to Netisten Maril. Not that Cassi felt any extraordinary loyalty to the man who had saved his neck from the gallows, but the Emperor paid generously for his services, and this mission could make Cassi rich as any lord.

He had considered and discarded a number of hasty plans on his way to the docks, based on his knowledge of the Pellinites' blockade. Once at the waterfront, Cassi sighted a ponderous trireme in the process of casting off. It was as good a chance as any, he decided. Raking his memory for bits of information he might work from, Cassi ran toward the vessel and jumped on board even as it slid away from its mooring.

He smiled cheerfully at the milling sailors and marines, who gazed at him curiously. Sitting against the rail to catch his breath, Cassi pulled off his newly issued helmet and wiped his face with his forearm. Below him, the slaves rattled their oars into place. The ship began to get under way.

An officer approached him with a frown. "You! What's your story?" he barked.

Cassi clumsily clapped on his helmet and snapped a salute. "Better late than never, sir! I... uh.... was sick this morning and I didn't wake up till they threw me... I mean, I got here as quick as I could, but I got turned around..." He sputtered on sheepishly, keeping an eye on the receding shoreline.

The officer spat. "Shit! You damned marines can't even spend a night in a whorehouse and bear up the next day. I ought to have you flogged as an example, soldier! Shitload of good that would do, with your

sort of gutter-scrapings. Where Kane digs up scum like you, and how he expects trained officers to make fighting men out of you, is more than I can figure!"

The angry officer continued to chew him out for the benefit of all those on deck, while above them the sails filled with wind and the trireme plowed out to sea. Out of breath, he thumbed through his rollbook. "What did you say your name was, soldier?" he growled.

Cassi told him, and watched him run his finger along several dirty pages of names. "This is the Sorpath, I guess?" he queried as the officer came to the end of his roll and started over.

The officer looked stricken. "The Sorpath sailed for battle maneuvers this morning," he said heavily. "You stupid ass! You're on the wrong ship! This is the Hast-Endab, and we're bound for two weeks of patrol south around Fisitia!"

Cassi burst into astonished protests of innocence. He'd thought it was before noon yet, and how could he recognize a new ship, and he didn't have time to ask, and he couldn't read what it said on the bow, and...

By the time the officer finished cussing him out, the ship had put not a few miles behind them. "Damn well got a notion to feed you to the fish!" he concluded. "But I'm stuck with you, so you'll get to fill in for the ones who didn't make it out of the whorehouses for this crew. Lato knows how Kane expects disciplined troops out of the crap he keeps handing us for recruits! Stay out of my way, soldier! That's all!"

Orders Cassi gladly planned to obey. He joined the laughing marines, weakened and sick as the tension slipped from him. All that remained for him was to find a way to jump ship when the propitious moment came.

He lapsed into a dream of the rewards Netisten Maril would heap upon him in a few days. It amused Cassi that he, a gutter-born thief, had boldly entered and then escaped the diabolical web Efrek was spinning.

XIII

Two Enemies Meet

Netisten Maril sat on the obsidian-and-gold Imperial throne in his high-vaulted audience hall. About him rose the towering walls of his palace at Thovnosten, capital city of Thovnos and of the Empire. His

black-bearded face was dark with barely restrained anger, and he nervously tapped the golden throne arm with his dagger hilt, adding a new pattern of tiny dents across the soft metal. The Emperor glared at the assembled counselors, evidently chafing for an excuse to cut a few throats. He usually needed little excuse.

Maril was a well-built man, still in his early forties. If his prime of life had passed the Emperor, there lay no hint in his hard-muscled frame. His aristocratic face was lined with traces of frequently vented rage--creases and suffused veins that matched the thin white scars on his weathered skin, hallmarks of past battles. Here was a man who held on to what he claimed for his own--a man who had never yielded ground to an opponent, and considered any man a weakling who would yield for him. It made for a volcanic temper and a domineering, uncompromising spirit. The Emperor was a dangerous man to cross, and he was dangerous now. Netisten Maril had just learned that his power in the Empire was seriously threatened by an enemy whom he believed he had utterly destroyed.

A guardsman entered the doorway from the hallway beyond the throne room: "They're bringing him up now, milord," he announced, resuming his post.

Maril grunted, and watched the doorway with hostile eyes.

An unarmed youth of about twenty-five entered, followed by two other guards, who stopped at the door to let him enter alone. Lages carried his powerful body well erect as he stalked toward the black-and-gold throne. Exercise had passed the time and kept him in shape, but the paleness of his complexion evidenced the more than two months he had spent in his cell. His appearance was somewhat shabby withal--his long brown hair unkempt, and his clothing carelessly chosen and hastily arranged. Lages had been given only a short time to prepare for this audience--and he fully expected it to end in an audience with the headsman. His expression was sullen, his well-muscled body tense. His brown eyes quickly surveyed the room--searching for M'Cori. But the girl was not present. Only Maril's most trusted counselors--and the ever vigilant guards. Arrogantly, he drew himself up and glared back at Maril.

Maril fought down his resentment and forced himself to speak calmly. "Well, Lages--I hope this last stay in my dungeons has taught you a little something."

No answer came but an insolent glare.

Maril shrugged. "I could have killed you. I should have killed you. Only your high rank and your innocence in your father's treasonous plot spared you when I punished the original nest of conspirators. Then the first time when you so rashly attempted my life, I spared you out of acknowledgment that your father's death had robbed you of sanity. A questionable premise--a stupidity compounded by my accepting your promise of honorable conduct as the valid word of a gentleman. But when you broke your vow and escaped to let that pack of jackals make a puppet and a fool of you--when you again tried to plot against me! By all rights and reason, I should have executed you on the spot. If it hadn't been for the old friendship I bore your family, and my daughter's unreasonable fondness for your worthless carcass--"

"Leave M'Cori out of this, you damned butcher!" Lages exploded. "And your lies of friendship as well. You hate me nearly as much as I hate you, and you've never cared a damn for M'Cori's feelings. There's only one single reason why you haven't eliminated me, and it's the same reason today as you had two years ago. We two are the last direct heirs of the Netisten blood, and you're too proud to let that blood die out. If you could possibly get a male heir, I'd be dead in an instant. So spare me these accusations of my having violated your mercy--I've seen what mercy you showed my father and his friends."

"You insolent bastard's son! Your father was a traitor to the Empire, and I killed him in a fair fight!"

"You murdered him in bed when you found he'd seduced your wife! Couldn't you even get it up for Efre!"

Maril snarled in rage and leaped from his throne, dagger poised to strike. Lages jumped back into a fighter's crouch--eyes wild, watching the object of his hatred warily. Bare-handed and in the presence of his guards, he would kill the man at first opening.

"Milords! Stop it!" shouted a counselor. "For the sake of us all, don't fight among yourselves now! It will only mean ruin for the Empire and death for all of us!" Several of them started to move toward the two--hesitantly, as they knew what it was to interfere with Maril when he was enraged.

With difficulty, Maril regained control of himself. Lowering his dagger, he ordered, "Get out! All of you get out! I'll call for you when I want you!"

With backward glances, the court nervously filed out of the audience chamber. The guards followed, with all the reluctance of sailors leaving a burning ship.

"Now then," intoned Maril, once they were alone. "Despite your perversity, your obstinance. Despite your hostility and past treason. Despite all reason and judgment. I'm going out on a limb to show you mercy one final time. I may be a complete fool, but I'm going to give you a last chance to redeem yourself.

"If you can prove to me once more that you can be trusted, I'll let pass what has happened between us. I'll release you from confinement and restore to you all the privileges of your station. I'll give you leadership over the Imperial fleet. I'll even place you as my second-in-command, as though you were my son and true heir. Remember that you can still ascend my throne someday, Lages. But cross me just once again, and I swear to you I'll kill you even if you were my only son!"

Lages was startled--dumbfounded--for he knew the Emperor to be implacable. He had come to this audience fully expecting death; instead, his enemy offered to return his freedom and high position. Amazement at this incredible turn of fortune broke through his armor of hatred.

"What makes you think you dare trust me?" he wanted to know, wondering suddenly what devious trick Maril intended with this offer of full pardon.

Maril settled back on his throne, watching Lages carefully. "I think I know your heart, Lages. Even if you won't admit it, you know I did the only thing I could with your father. It wasn't some petty court intrigue--it was high treason he entered into. Custom and law alike demand only one end for conspiracy against the Empire. If Leyan was your father, don't forget he was also my brother. That was why I dealt with him as I did--giving him his chance either to kill me or to die honorably in equal combat."

Lages clenched his fists, but held back the anger in his reply. "Perhaps that's true--I won't say. A man's motives are his secret alone. But I know one thing for certain: custom also demands that I avenge the death of my father."

Maril nodded acknowledgment. "Yes, I realize this. Another reason why I haven't executed you."

"That doesn't mean I've tried to kill you only to satisfy custom. This quarrel is a blood feud between the two of us--man to man. I swear to you, there's no pleasure I'd crave more than to savour your death by

these hands!" He raised both fists before him to punctuate his words.

Maril's eyes burned with reflected fury--but he answered with a harsh laugh. "Nevertheless, you're going to have to put aside our feud for now, nephew. Instead--if I understand your heart as I think I do--you're actually going to help me..."

"I'll help strangle you with your own guts!"

Maril ignored the outburst. "Yes, help me. We both seek to avenge your father."

Lages was taken off guard. "What do you mean?" he asked quietly, wondering wherein lay the cruel jest. Such deviousness was as alien to Maril's temperament as the show of mercy he had thus far extended to his deadly enemy.

Maril smiled coldly, pressing his advantage. "I didn't kill your father; you should know that. Sure, it was my hand that put a sword through his flesh--but I didn't kill him. Leyan was my brother; I had never desired his death, until fate demanded it. I'm no more responsible for Leyan's death than is the sword that cut him down. My hand and my sword were merely instruments of the dark fate that has caught us all up in its web--an evil fate woven by a cunning fiend who has plotted to destroy all of our blood.

"No, Lages. It was not I who murdered Leyan. It was the scheming witch who poisoned my brother's mind against me--who lured him into a black conspiracy to fulfill, her own twisted motives. It was Efre! who murdered your father. I say to you that Efre! murdered Leyan, just as surely as if her hand had plunged the blade into his heart!"

Lages stood silently scowling. The circumstances of Efre!'s guilt had occurred to him before, to be sure--but the furious rush of his emotions would not let reason channel his rage to the dead sorceress. Often on sleepless nights he had tossed about in frustrated agony of spirit--cursing the beautiful enchantress who had destroyed so many with her treacherous schemes; But it was Maril whose victory meant his father's ruin and the collapse of his own hopes. Maril lived while the others died, and this Lages could not endure.

"Yes, Efre!." The Emperor saw uncertainty in Lages face and drove relentlessly with his argument. "You knew in your heart that the witch was to blame for Leyan's downfall, but you wouldn't acknowledge it--even to yourself. Efre! was beyond your revenge, and I was someone tangible to focus your hatred on--an obvious villain when grief and shame fired your senses with blood-madness. So you raged at Netisten Maril, forgetting the venomous creature who seduced your father to his own destruction."

Struggling beneath an intolerable emotional strain, Lages bent his head and said in almost a whisper, "Efre! Yes, what you say is true. I realize that now. Perhaps I've known it secretly all this time. But Efre! is dead, and I--"

"No!" interrupted Maril. A note of awe--almost of terror--entered his voice. "No, Efre! is not dead! In her lair on Pellin the sorceress still lives. I tell you, Efre! still lives--and by all the gods, I can't understand how or why!"

"What! How do you know this?" Lages's troubled thoughts reeled from yet another incredible reversal of what he had considered solid actuality. "It can't be true! What jest do you--"

"I've sensed something has been afoot for months now," Maril cut him off. "Agents have brought me reports of unusual movements of ships and men throughout the Empire. A number of my lords have been

restive; others have discreetly withdrawn from my surveillance. And there's been an alarmingly high mortality among my spies. Especially have I found it difficult to obtain information pertaining to Pellin. The few humdrum reports of peaceful activity there made a suspicious contrast to the associated information--and to the sinister fact that most of my agents on Pellin had ceased to report at all. It was obvious that a plot was taking shape against me, but I have been unable to secure any specific information--nothing that I could pin down and move to destroy."

Maril scowled. "Of course, your own ill-advised efforts not only called for all my attention, but until recently obscured this deeper threat to the Empire. I had assumed, not unnaturally, that you somehow had a hand in the plot I sensed was taking shape." He did not add that one reason he had spared Lages was to seek to draw out his imagined co-conspirators.

"Then this morning, Cassi, one of my most capable spies, returned to me from Pellin, where he had ventured along with a band of cutthroats who had been told there would be work for them there. Even Cassi was barely able to escape from that accursed isle to make his report. He was half-dead when he finally was picked up by a fishing boat off Fisitia--after he'd jumped off a rebel warship at night and paddled toward the mainland with just a cork-stuffed pair of pants to keep afloat.

"But Cassi brought away with him the information I've been seeking. He tells me that Efre is still alive--although badly disfigured after her ride through our city. Cassi saw her in the cellars of Dan-Legeh with his own eyes, so he swears. He can't explain how she managed to live through it, but her punishment did nothing to cripple the hellish cunning of her mind--and now the fires of hatred eat at her evil soul. Over the months Efre has made far-reaching preparations to conquer Thovnos and to seize the throne of Empire. Cassi says the witch has amassed a dangerously large following for her rebellion. He also tells me that Efre has appointed as her general some enigmatic outlander whom she brought in from the Lartroxian mainland. He calls himself Kane."

"Kane? I know of only one man to bear that name."

"Yes." Maril's voice lost its domineering assuredness. "This is another strange thing that plagues my mind. Cassi got close to the man on two occasions, and he says Kane even looks like the monster of legend. Further, he says that the rebels boast among themselves that their new leader and Red Kane, whose pirate hordes pillaged our coasts two centuries ago, are one and the same man!"

He paused for a moment, lost in speculation. "Wait, I'll summon Cassi. He should be somewhat rested from his ordeal. We'll listen to his complete report now."

Maril bellowed for the guards. Bodies crowded the doorway in an instant. "Guardman! Bring Cassi to me!"

"The Kane of old, uncle?" Lages shook his head in bewilderment. "No, that doesn't seem possible. More likely this is more of the witch's cunning. Efre has found someone of chance resemblance to Kane and is using his legend to give her rebels confidence."

"That's what I thought, Lages," replied Maril, noting with pleasure that his nephew had once again acknowledged their relationship. It was beginning to look as if he would be able to count on his loyalty after all. "But then again, it isn't possible that Efre should have lived. Who can say what powers that sorceress commands? Events are taking a weird turn, and I don't like it. Not at all. I fear nothing of flesh or of steel--but sorcery..."

Maril spoke with compelling earnestness. "Then I can count on your loyalty in this matter, can't I? Will

you give me your word of honor to end this pointless feud? Will you fight at my side to destroy this witch whose black crimes and foul lusts have affronted the gods and brought doom to the house of Netisten?"

According to his code, there was only one answer Lages could give. He nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. You can count on my loyalty. I give my oath to help you destroy the witch. If it is true that Efre has escaped her deserved fate, you can be certain that I'll never rest until she and her hellish conspiracy are wiped out. Efre has my father's death to answer for, and neither a resurrected pirate lord nor all her sorcerous powers shall save the scheming whore from my vengeance!"

"I knew I could trust you to see reason," exulted Maril. He grasped his nephew's hand with convincing enthusiasm. "There's still hope that the rebellion can be nipped in the bud. We'll get a full report from Cassi--precise details on Efre's plans and defenses, the names of the traitors in our midst. Then I'll send the Imperial fleet to Prisarte under your command. As much of the Imperial navy as we can mobilize in a short week should be enough to crush the rebels and burn the city and its fortress to clean ashes."

A guardsman entered the throne room. His face was pallid, and he was alone.

"Where's Cassi?" Maril demanded.

The guardsman licked his lips. "Milord, I think you had best see to this for yourself."

Maril glared at the unhappy guard. With an oath, the Emperor heaved himself from his throne and stalked from the hall.

Lages stood in the empty audience hall, arms folded across his broad chest, eyes pensive. His brow furrowed in speculation. Too many revelations in one hour left his mind in turmoil. This morning he was a prisoner, disgraced and awaiting execution. It was not yet noon--and he was free, restored to his rank, given command of the Imperial fleet, promised succession to the throne. Glory and power were his to strive for. The gods had given him the chance to win vengeance on Efre, his place on the Imperial throne, and M'Cori for his wife. Ambitious plans--but with daring and ability, a strong man could conquer anything.

So the gods had chosen to alter the woven pattern of his fate. He smiled, remembering the prophecy. The priestess had known Lages was favored by the gods.

Lages's smile twisted into a snarl. "This changes nothing, dear uncle," he whispered to the shadows. "I gave you my word to be loyal until Efre is slain. After that..."

Only the shadows heard his mirthless laugh.

...And One Came Out

Cassi opened one eye, saw the silken sheets and lush fur coverings of his bed, opened the other eye, saw the luxurious appointments of his quarters. He yawned, stretched overtaxed muscles and stiffened limbs. He was in the Imperial palace of Thovnosten. He was no longer a hunted man.

He was a wealthy man. Cassi scratched the stubble of his pointed jaw and mused upon the extent of the Emperor's generosity. From now on, he would live the life of an aristocrat--no more prowling about the alleys of Thovnosten. He would live in a splendid manor, stay drunk and well fed and well laid, worry how to keep his former colleagues from stealing his jewels and costly furnishings.

Something had awakened him. He glowered at the doorway to his chambers. Netisten Maril had posted enough guards there to keep out an army. The security was comforting, but right now Cassi wanted to sleep. If the fools would make a little less noise...

"Sir? Are you awake?" A guardsman stood at attention on the threshold.

Cassi savoured the sight of a member of the Imperial guard addressing him in such manner. He curled his lips to reply. "I am now. What is it?" He let his tone insinuate that the interruption had better not be over some trifle.

"Someone to see you, sir."

"Tell him to go bugger himself," Cassi yawned. A man of his station could not entertain casual callers, and if Maril wanted him, the guards would not be so circumspect.

"But I'd prefer that you do that for me, milord," purred a new voice.

Cassi sat up. Sleep was the last thing on his mind. "Netisten Maril sent me to you," she smiled. "Do you like me?"

She was lithe as a dancer, with a tight figure that pressed against the clinging folds of the sheer silk gown that she wore. Her hair was short and tightly curled, extravagantly dyed in the colors of autumn leaves. Her face was as somber and coquettish as a child's, and her nails were long and lacquered in black. Cassi guessed she could barely have reached her middle teens.

"Come here," he grinned.

"Milord, our orders are to admit no one but the Emperor himself," the guard protested. "There is danger that--"

She chuckled in a surprisingly throaty tone. "Do I look so dangerous, milord?"

Black-nailed fingers plucked at the fastenings of her gold-and-yellow gown. The folds of silk floated down upon her ankles. She was willowy and white, and she had followed the pattern of autumn-hued dyes throughout. She made a leisurely pirouette.

"Do you fear me, milord?" she smiled. "Do I hide weapons upon my person?"

"Come here," Cassi invited thickly.

The guardsman interjected, "Milord, our orders are to--"

"To hell with your orders, fool!" Cassi sneered. "My friend, Netisten Maril, sends me evidence of his favor. Now, go!"

She laughed as they closed the door. "What is your pleasure, milord?" She stepped away from her pile of silks, and danced toward him like some fantastic butterfly.

"We'll think of something, you and I," Cassi grinned, making way for her on the bed.

She was accomplished, Cassi had to admit. After a while, he lifted her up and rolled astride her. "Maril shows his gratitude in a fine style," he gasped between kisses. "Ahhh... Watch your nails, bitch! My back is sunburned, and salted as a sailor's... Ahh..."

Her breath came in sudden gasps as her nails dug into the flesh of his back. "Do they not call this ecstasy the little death?" she panted, biting at his ear.

Cassi felt his orgasm shudder through him. He was still dizzy and shaken, wondering at her words, when the venom encrusted beneath her raking nails fired his veins with final agony.

She licked the froth from his dead lips, and winked as she sauntered past the guards.

XV

A Tower at Dawn

The night skies were pale with the approach of dawn. Two figures stood side by side on a tower before the harbor gate of Thovnosten, watching the stars go out. Lages stood straight and proud as if the months of imprisonment had been but a bad dream, forgotten now. The youth was resplendent in his silvered mail, crested helmet, and scarlet cloak of an Imperial general. M'Cori stood beneath the shelter of his arm, silent as the first light of dawn high lighted the cascade of fine blond hair that spilled over her shoulders. Caught at her delicate throat by an emerald pin, a splendid cloak of white ermine held back

the cold sea breeze. The wind fluttered her gown against her slender form, whipped strands of hair across her patrician features. She was fragile and beautiful as some exquisite porcelain goddess--pale and golden with eyes green as the sea below them.

"It's dawn," said Lages simply.

"Dawn. And now you must sail." M'Cori stared down at the fleet tossing at anchor below them. She counted slowly, the syllables falling softly under each breath. "Only twenty-four ships. So few to meet the witch's traitor fleet."

"These are all the warships we can have at battle-ready on such short notice. In a month we could have another hundred, but in a month Efreil will have mobilized her forces, too. It's best we attack now, while her preparations are incomplete. And don't forget--our vessels are every one of them first-class warships, well armed and manned by trained soldiers. We'll only be facing a mob of undisciplined renegades. It's a pity that Cassi didn't get the chance to tell us all he knew. From what he indicated, their fleet probably consists of a handful of real warships and a motley scattering of jury-rigged merchants and barges converted to haul troops and supplies. We'll sweep them from the seas."

She seemed to disregard his confidence. "I'm losing you again, dearest--again, after all those weeks in prison. Lages, I lied--at times I was sure Father meant to kill you. He would have eventually, if he hadn't needed you to fight Efreil.

"Now you're free. Free--only to leave me again, after but a few days of happiness together. I almost wish you had remained in that cell. You were safe there, and I could visit you whenever I wished."

Lages turned on her. "Like a pet bird in a cage! Something to bring sweets and flowers to! A man prefers death to an existence such as that!"

He caught himself. He hadn't meant to snap at her like that. Horment! She was only concerned with his safety. Her baffling system of illogic at times was infuriating. He started to apologize--but, feeling awkward, said nothing. Instead he looked at the skies and knew he had to leave.

"I love you, M'Cori," he whispered.

She threw her white arms around his mailed shoulders and clung to him desperately. After a moment he gently loosened their embrace. Feeling a keen desire to possess her--and at the same instant a longing to be free of her--Lages marched down the steps from the tower and to the harbor.

Through her tears, M'Cori watched the fleet sail out.

Visions of Black Prometheus

Cut deep into the basalt beneath Dan-Legeh lay the secret chamber of Efrek. Few were those who came here willingly, and fewer those who left again. In this darkened vault--a great hollow of cunningly hewn stone, where the flickering cressets cast the brightest light that ever would shine here--Efrek engaged in her sorceries and experiments in the black arts. For ages past, the chamber had been put to this accursed usage by the Pellin lords, and the expansive room was filled with debris of evil enterprises centuries forgotten.

The chamber was a vast, shadowy cavern, and great oil lamps--most of them unlit for centuries--were positioned at frequent intervals to give illumination. The lamps stood on tripods half the height of a man, and many gallons of oil filled their tanks to feed the lambent flames. The center of the chamber was taken up with a wide pool of inky water--a black mirror-like surface encircled by a low wall with curious carvings in bas-relief. About the pool stood a number of man-sized statues of some obscenely tentacled sea demon. A visitor might wonder if this were not the fane of some forgotten devil cult, whose acolytes were now dust with their gods. The pool gave back the torchlight like polished jet, and no conception of its depth could be realized from peering within. It must be very deep, for its level rose and fell with the tides--indicating communication with the sea.

Around this circular pool were arranged the apparatus and paraphernalia of Efrek's supernatural delvings--strangely bound tomes of forbidden knowledge, weirdly shaped alembics and retorts and other alchemical devices, caskets and vials filled with powders and elixirs and preserved objects of dubious origins, eldritch carvings on the floor and walls. The stained and freshly oiled instruments of torture were the least abhorrent objects within the chamber.

Efrek was not alone in this place. Before her, imprisoned within the borders of a meticulously ordered pentagram, reared the serpentine coils of her familiar demon--a creature of hideous malevolence summoned by Efrek from another plane of existence. The demon was no stranger to Efrek or to this chamber. The sorceress was wont to evoke her monstrous pet in order to gain certain knowledge that no human resource could supply. For this purpose she had summoned her creature once again.

The pentagram defied its wrathful efforts to break free. Disappointed, the demon abandoned the attempt. Glaring at the triumphant sorceress, it spoke in its harsh, whispering tones "I see that you have succeeded in bringing Kane to your side. To be sure, he seems to be most energetic in his services to you. How does your new lover suit you?"

Efrek smiled at the demon's leering snicker. "I am completely satisfied with your recommendation. Kane is exactly the man I needed for this venture. He has given me invaluable lessons in treachery, introduced new strategy and tactics for my navy, organized all aspects of my rebellion with an incomparable ability."

She paused, then went on to the reason for this evocation. "Kane seems to me more than human, somehow. Kane is a unique combination--a man of incredible strength, ruthless daring, intellectual genius, and evil to the core. There's something utterly inhuman about his eyes--they are the mark of a killer, or my every instinct lies! Yes, I can make good use of Kane. A deadly weapon, to be sure--and as treacherous as he is dangerous. I will use Kane, but I won't trust him an inch!"

The demon laughed mockingly. "I see--like recognizes like. Can you be certain, though, that you can control him? I wonder."

Efrel snarled in anger. "I can handle Kane! He's but a man--for all his black heart and long life. The fool has an inkling of but a fraction of my powers, while I know Kane for what he is. Kane can withhold no mysteries from Efrel!

"But this is why I have summoned you. Thus far you have told me very little of Kane. Only that Red Kane the pirate lord still lived, that he was the one man who could gain victory for me, that he could be found on the Lartroxian coast. Tonight I intend to devote this entire evocation to learning everything about Kane. Tell me now, who--or what--is Kane? What has he done during these decades since he terrorized the Empire? Who was he before he appeared in our realm to lead his pirate horde on their reign of carnage? And how has he escaped death for these two centuries?"

Again the demon laughed. "There are many things you may not know of Kane. Even in my world there are mysteries concerned with Kane that have escaped our wisdom. Even to, tell you what we know of him would require far more time than your evocation can hold me here. But while your spell lasts, I shall tell you a little of the man you have called forth from the past.

"I obey your command. Behold now, as I show to you but a few tableaux of past moments in Kane's fantastic history."

The outlines of the underground chamber suddenly began to fade. The massive lamps, the grotesque statues, the circular pool, the instruments of torture, the sorcerous paraphernalia--all grew indistinct before her eyes, dissolved into blackness. Efrel seemed to stand vertiginously in the midst of infinite oblivion, with only the sardonic demon visible in the cosmic darkness.

Then light began to form out of the chaos. Wavering images began to take shape before her, tumbling kaleidoscopic patterns of time. Flashing in front of her eyes now were frozen instants of the past--brief glimpses of Kane's past life, wrested from eternity by the demon's supernatural powers and projected onto her consciousness.

Efrel saw Kane running through a ruined city, a slim girl dashing at his side. Behind them thundered a dozen vicious-looking bandits--triumph on their cruel faces as they urged their mounts after the fugitives. The city's towers were broken and toppled, its buildings gutted and fire-scarred. Horizons were strangely foreshortened, as if the city were built upon a pinnacle above a plain. The rubble-choked streets gave Kane a short lead over the riders--and as he momentarily escaped their sight, he leaped through a darkened doorway, pulling the girl after him.

Kane lay naked across a mouldering bed, in a room where moonlight spilled through a window curtained with dusty cobwebs. Beyond the window stretched the crumbling parapets of a fortress that had slumbered in ruin for decades. A deserted village could dimly be seen in the valley below. Kane seemed to give no notice to the decay rampant about him as he lay there, weakly, in a dream. Stepping else to, him in the musty chamber was a pale-skinned woman, her porcelain figure veiled with rotting silk. The moonlight shone white upon her long fangs as she smiled at the man who awaited her.

A gore-spattered Kane reeled, locked in combat with a towering demon of twice his bulk. Doll-sized imps scampered about the thrashing legs of the combatants--stabbing at Kane with tiny razor-edged spears: Several of the imps lay crushed and sundered upon the red earth. Behind them, a naked girl stood bound to a rock, watching the battle in terror. Desolate mountains and black stones ringed the figures, and from the cliff beside them yawned a black cave that seemed to drop off straight into the bowels of

the earth. Kane's sword was broken, and he slashed desperately with the jagged forte--holding away the demon's jaws with his free arm.

Kane slipped stealthily along empty streets in a city where no window showed a light against the darkness. There were no signs of destruction, but the buildings stood as if deserted for several years. Here and there the moonlight disclosed a scattering of dry bones. Torches followed behind Kane as half a dozen grim-faced men stalked him through the dead city.

The night exploded into a chaos of bloodshed and flame. Kane strode through the pillaged streets of a city, sword red in his fist--laughing mightily as his pirate horde rioted all about him. Barbaric figures smashed down doors of humus, slaying all who confronted them. Howling warriors raced through the sheets, loaded down with riches and plunder. Woman and children were being cut down alongside their men, as the younger girls were carried off, bare-limbed and screaming, into the darkness. Kane seized a wine bottle from a passing looter and poured its contents over his blood-flecked smile.

Kane ran up a long flight of gain, pursued by a slaving white-furred creature, half man and half wolf. Below them lay a castle hall--its tables overturned and its floors crimson with blood. Strewn about were the tom and broken bodies of scores of men and grey wolves. At the top of the stairway, Kane suddenly turned to hurl himself upon the hulking werewolf. Locked in a bone-crushing embrace, man and were-beast hurtled back down the stairs, bounding through the railing near the bottom and crashing to the hall floor. The stunning impact threw them apart. Kane shook the pain from his head groggily as the werewolf champed its reddened fangs and lunged for him.

Stars shone down upon a tower jutting far into the nighted sky. Wearing robes of a fantastic pattern, Kane hunched in concentration over a table strewn with strange volumes and scrolls of rust-red writing. He was muttering to himself while he worked over pages of diagrams and calculations. Often he referred to the dark tomes of necromantic lore that lay before him. An intricate system of pentagrams and occult glyphs covered much of the tower walls, while a terrified girl wept in chains in one corner.

Kane sat upon an immense throne of obsidian; on his head was a crown of unfaceted jewels. A snarling lion lay at his feet, causing the courtiers who stood beside his throne to keep their distance. Their manner of dress was unfamiliar, nor was the race immediately recognizable. Kane's face was twisted with anger, and his lips formed strange syllables as he made some decree to those assembled before his throne. Consternation shuddered through their ranks at his words--but they slunk away when he leaped up in fury and brandished his scepter as if it were a mace.

Shambling man-sized creatures, who looked like monstrous hybrids of man and frog, stood watching Kane in the shattered chamber of some colossal prehuman structure. Great bronze swords were clutched in webbed fists as they waited in the shadows of the cracked and leaning walls. Slimy water covered much of the floor, and fleshy vines stole through jagged apertures to enshroud looming machines of unguessable nature. A gigantic crystal filled the center of the chamber--a sullen dome nearly a hundred yards across, composed of a substance that resembled bloodstone. The scarlet veins of the crystal suddenly seemed to glow with life. Blinding flashes of coruscant energy burst from long-slumbering pillars of machinery, driving the amphibian creatures back in fear. An eerie light of green, veined with red, shot forth from the depths of the awakened crystal and bathed Kane in its fire.

Kane stood in what appeared to be a cavern, stretching endlessly far beneath the earth. Jagged stalactites hung like black clouds from the cavern roof a mile above; about him the horizon vanished over a smoking plain of shattered rock and angry lava pits. In this nightmare vision of Hell, Kane was not alone. Dark creatures of blighted beauty stood around him--bizarre demons with leathery wings, and beautiful faces that glowed with evil wisdom. They wheeled about Kane in attitudes half of menace, part

curiosity. Kane spoke earnestly to one who seemed to be their leader--a tall demonic figure of perfect beauty and consummate evil, whose eyes shone like yellow suns.

Kane rolled on the floor of a fantastic temple, struggling with another man before its smoking altar. Kane's eyes were wild with murder-lust, as he wrestled there on the stones. His powerful hands were locked about his opponent's throat--who now flailed only weakly at Kane's grinning face. The livid face of the man he strangled bore a striking resemblance to Kane's own primitive features.

The pictures flashed through Efre's mind at a bewildering speed--taking shape, then dissolving, almost faster than she could recognize each scene. It was a whirlpool of images that spun past on and on--some only an instant's glimpse of Kane's face, others complete tableaux that lasted for perhaps a minute. The demon's grating voice reached her ears through the phantasmagoria--while Efre sought to comprehend the frozen moments of Kane's incredible saga as they burst from the vault of eternity.

"Two centuries--they are nothing to Kane. Years are only flickering moments to a man who has seen ages roll past him, empires rise and crumble, mankind emerge from infancy, and the elder races pass into darkness. You have badly underestimated Kane--as you can see now, Efre. He is not, as you had supposed, a mere pirate lord who has been kept living past his time by a freak of fate. No, Efre? Pirate, thief, beggar, king, sorcerer, warrior, scholar, general, poet, assassin--his roles have been myriad. This man who measures centuries like years has been many things in his endless wandering.

"Kane was one of the first true men--born into a hostile world of strange ancient beings. In this dawn world of humanity, Kane defied the insane god who had created his race--an experiment that had turned out far from the creator's expectations. This demented elder god dabbled at creating a race of mindless creatures whose only existence would be to amuse and delight him. He almost succeeded, until Kane rebelled against this stifling paradise and spurred the young race to independent will. He killed his own brother, who sought to oppose his heresy, thus bringing violent death as well as rebellion to the infant mankind. Disgusted at the failure of his depraved design, the god abandoned his creation. And for his act of defiance, Kane was cursed with immortality--doomed to roam this world under the shadow of violence and death. His blighted wandering will cease only when Kane himself can be destroyed by the violence to which he first gave expression. And to distinguish Kane from the rest of mankind whom he has renounced are his hellish eyes--killer's eyes--the Mark of Kane!

"For centuries he has wandered from place to place, and wherever he lingers, he brings death and destruction with him. He is a harbinger of death--a lord of chaos. To tear down, to kill and destroy is his very nature. For was it not Kane who first introduced murder to a newborn race? This Kane, Efre, is the man you have chosen to league yourself with.

"To be sure, Kane is still a man--and a steel blade through Kane's heart will kill him as dead as any other man. But yet, Kane is not quite human. Natural death is closed to him, and his body has not aged an hour from the inception of the curse. Injuries quickly heal, to leave his body as it was at the moment of that curse. Only through violence can death claim him, and Kane has so far proved too strong for those who have sought to destroy him. For violence and death are the proper element of this lord of chaos, and herein he is master.

"But no man can live for centuries and remain altogether human. His mind is filled with the wisdom and experiences of centuries. He has seen things of which others can only dream; he has tasted knowledge that would drive sanity from the mind of another man. And he is not sane as your world reckons sanity. Kane's thoughts are not like those of another man, for he sees all things in the perspective of centuries. Lives of others are flashing motes of light. Time stands still for him, and everything you hold to be permanent Kane considers no more than ever-changing phenomena.

All that remains permanent for Kane is his own existence, and to make this interminable existence endurable is all that drives him on. His motives are unguessable, his actions unthinkable to human minds--for he lives in a world of flux in which he himself is the only stationary force.

"This then is he whom you have presumed to use to gain your revenge. And certainly Kane can accomplish all that you wish--I did not lie to you when I advised you to seek him out. Kane is your weapon; manipulate him if you can. Only remember that no pentagram holds safely this demon you have evoked. Beware, Efre!--not even the queen of night dares kindle her fire with the comet!"

With a final mocking laugh, the demon vanished. The darkness of infinity burst into a final vortex of images, then collapsed like a cosmic bubble. The chamber lay as before, altered only by the empty pentagram.

Shaken by the creature's revelations, Efre sat alone in the darkened chamber, thinking over what she had learned and cursing the unreliability of demonic aid. Uneasily, she recalled an ancestor who had asked to be showered with wealth--and was buried under an avalanche of gold.

At length she smiled confidently. After all, Kane had never encountered Efre in his wandering. She whispered to the darkness, "So, then! This knowledge I shall not fear, for it shall be my strength. As I know Kane's secret, thus shall it be easier to deal with him, when I know that I must. Let Kane first conquer an Empire for me--then there will be time to test Kane's immortality!"

XVII

Call to Battle

Kane drew on his battle gear, with movements sure and rapid from long practice. Although only just awakened, he moved about in the cold dawn-lit chamber as if he had been up for hours. Adjusting his mail hauberk, Kane wondered to himself--how many times had he done this before? How many battles had the dawn watched him prepare to fight? Not so many that the familiar chill in his guts ever failed to appear. Musing whether this last-minute uncertainty would ever leave him, he buckled on his greaves.

Over his shoulder, Kane called to Efre, "When is it estimated that the Imperial fleet will reach us? And do we know its exact strength?"

It seemed to him that Efre watched him with a strange intensity from her seat in a darkened corner of the

bedchamber. "My information tells me their fleet left at dawn five days ago," the sorceress replied, "sailing under good winds until yesterday's calm. So, assuming they will push on at their best speed to take us by surprise, the Imperial forces should enter our waters sometime between late morning and early tomorrow. As to their fleet, my informant counted twenty-four first-line warships--eleven of them triremes."

"Is Netisten Maril commanding them?" Kane inquired, fitting a greave over his other boot. Above the greaves, trousers of heavy leather ran from high boot tops to protect knee and thigh in the interval below the mail skirts of his hauberk.

"No. My spies tell me the Emperor has finally made peace with his nephew, Lages, and is sending him instead. Knowing Maril, he's being cautious in his old age--or likely he hopes that Lages will destroy both himself and my fleet. At any rate, he only now has received word of my conspiracy--so he's trying to hit us quickly before my plans can reach fruition. Hence the relatively small fleet."

Kane grunted and buckled his two-handed broadsword across his back. For a moment, he considered leaving it in favor of a shorter blade for the close fighting--when a short, chopping blade had an advantage in the press of bodies. Still, the broadsword had a nice balance, and he felt confident his arm could swing it without tiring. Its greater reach might prove useful, he decided.

Kane continued, "Are you certain that this is the full extent of their attack? This could be just the vanguard of a larger fleet. Try to draw us out and..."

"No. This one fleet is all Maril has sent. It would take him weeks to mobilize the entire Imperial navy, of course. Anyway, my source assured me that there are no other warships moving against Pellin at the moment."

"Where the hell's Alremas?" muttered Kane, selecting a long dagger, flat-bladed and weighted for throwing. "Your source seems amazingly sure of himself. Will his head roll if he's made an error, I wonder? Who is this mysterious informant, anyway--another one of your demons?"

"Not a demon." Efre smirked at his ignorance. "But creatures of this plane--creatures who dwell in hidden places of this world, whose secrets few humans have fathomed. They watch our foolish wars, unsuspected by forgetful mankind. Dare you guess? I assure you, Kane, my information comes from creatures as alien to mankind as any demon from the outer dimensions!"

She paused enticingly. "But I will tell you more of this at another time. Efre does not share her secrets needlessly."

Imel burst in, out of breath. Busily the renegade fretted with the fastenings of his magnificent cuirass. He winced at the thought of how the crimson lacquer the gold tracery would look by the end of the day, but at least he knew he would cut an imposing figure--victor or corpse.

"Have all the officers been alerted?" snapped Kane, taking his anger at Efre out on Imel.

"Yes. I've seen to that personally."

"And the men?"

"The trumpeters have sounded the call to arms in every barracks, and the fleet has acknowledged. The marines will be ready to board in an hour. Meanwhile, we've managed to arouse the entire city. Things

are moving in good order, all things considered."

Kane scowled as Imel fidgeted with his cuirass. "I hope you can swim with that thing on--you'll never get it off in the water. All right--see that everything moves with all possible dispatch. Lages and the Imperial fleet may be here in a matter of hours, and I want to have every available ship manned and ready to meet them. So get to it and stop preening yourself! And tell Alremas to get his ass up here, if you see him!"

"Yes, milord!" saluted Imel. He wheeled smartly from the chamber, almost colliding with Arbas. The assassin sprang agilely aside and entered the room cursing to himself.

"Battle alert already, Kane?" Arbas queried. "Thought we were supposed to have more time. Did that damned spy screw things up?"

"It seems he did. But things couldn't have gone on like this much longer. Fortunately, Maril hasn't sent the entire Imperial fleet, but it's still going to be touch and go. I'll want you with me on the Ara-Teving--I'd like someone at my back I can trust. In the meantime check around on how preparations are going. Your pal, Imel, will be glad for any help you can give him, but mostly let me know where there's any problem."

As Arbas left, Kane turned to Efre. "Now we'll see how well I was able to get your navy kicked into shape in the past weeks. And don't worry about a court martial if my leadership turns out to have been ineffective. But to return to my earlier questions. You tell me that your information on Maril's fleet has come from these inhuman allies you keep hinting about. That you should keep them a mystery from your general seems pointless to me. That's your affair, though. In any case, I hope you've called for their aid against Lages--we can use whatever supernatural powers you command."

Efre ignored his prodding. "You'll have to fight this battle completely on your own, Kane. As you know, the Imperial fleet will be protected against all commonplace sorceries. And the time is not right for me to call upon those forces to which I've often alluded. Otherwise I'd never have needed you, would I?"

Kane started to argue further, but at that moment Oxfors Alremas leisurely entered the chamber. "Well, you managed to take your sweet time getting here!" Kane growled.

Alremas gave him an angry glare. "I'm not accustomed to being ordered around like a common soldier. And don't send that renegade parvenu calling for me next time, either! I may be forced to act as second-in-command to you for the moment, but don't forget that you only usurp the position that I--"

He caught sight of Efre and checked himself. "Good morning, my Queen," he greeted her calmly.

Efre raised herself. "And good morning to you, Oxfors Alremas." She hobbled to the door. "I have things to do myself now, so I'll take leave of you, Kane. I'm sure Alremas will give you his full cooperation. Won't you, Alremas?" She smiled at him with serpentine menace, then limped for the stair.

All the rebellious spirits seemed drained from Alremas as he dazedly turned to Kane.

"Now then," began Kane, "if I may have your gracious attention, there's a battle to be fought. Lages is commanding a fleet of some twenty-four warships that will reach here in a matter of hours. Almost half of these are triremes, and all of them are first-class fighting ships. As you know, we haven't dared to mass our own forces for the danger of discovery, so all we can mobilize at this moment are five triremes and seven other real warships. Add to this about twenty-six converted merchants, barges, and smaller craft--and we're left with a damn small fleet to take on the Imperials. Also Efre tells me she can't help out

at this time with whatever secret powers she makes boast to control.

"So we're going to have a close fight of it, and we'll need every available man and ship. And I want them ready as soon as possible! I don't intend for Lages to catch us in the harbor. We'll put out and wait for him on the open sea, where we can count on enough room to maneuver. If this patchwork navy has just followed through with the program I've drilled into it, we should be able to give Lages a more dangerous game than he had thought to play.

"We've planned this out before to the last detail, so you understand what you're to do. Now by Lord Tloluvín's red eyes, get busy and see that my plans are carried out! Our personal quarrel can wait until Thovnosten is taken. I'll see you on board the Kelkin in an hour for final orders. That's all."

Alremas snarled something that was hardly a salute, and stalked out.

Kane buckled on a crested helmet and snatched up his axe. "If you survive today's battle, then I'm going to have to deal with you myself, Oxfors Alremas!" he muttered, scowling after the Pellinite lord. It occurred to him as he left to check on the battle preparations that his enemy was doubtlessly thinking along similar patterns.

XVIII

Fire on the Sea

They met the Imperial fleet about an hour before noon. From his flagship, the Ara-Teving, Kane observed the approaching fleet. Lages had wasted no time, and without Efre's mysterious intelligence, he almost certainly would have ripped through the rebel blockade and descended upon Prisarte before any effective resistance could be mounted. Lages had made use of yesterday's calm to beach his warships and unstep his mainmasts for battle. Under oars, his fleet was advancing at ramming speed.

Through his telescope, Kane admired the beauty of the long warships--their double or triple rows of oars knifing the water strongly and evenly, their jibsails taut in the wind, driving their ram-mounted hulls through the choppy sea. Then Kane grimly surveyed his own navy--a motley fleet of refitted antiques and converted merchants, with a few first-line warships like the Ara-Teving and the Kelkin. But they would have to do the job, he realized, thankful that there had been time for all the ships to move into formation here at a point some fifteen miles from the harbor of Prisarte. Whatever its worth as a fighting force, Efre's newborn fleet now awaited the Imperial onslaught.

"Well, what do you think?" asked Arbas from beside Kane.

"No different. If all their warships hit us in a wedge, we're going to be in a really bad position--if not to say, a hopeless position. So we'll have to make certain that all of them don't reach our formation--and that's why I designed these special barges. Now we're going to know the truth about this floating artillery that I've been getting so much lip about."

He pointed to the ten ponderous barges that were slowly being rowed out into a position slightly in advance of the rest of the fleet. The barges had been carefully converted according to Kane's dictate. Each hull was dominated by a gigantic catapult--not the small petrary that some warships carried, but a massive siege engine of the type that normally was constructed to breach a walled town or fortress.

Baskets of broken rocks along with stones of a hundred pounds or more filled the hold of each barge. But there was a stranger type of missile provided for the catapults as well--on which Kane was gambling for victory against a superior force. Special bundles of cloth, matting, kindling, and thatch had been bound together into a ball some two feet thick. Each bundle of tinder had then been soaked through with a mixture of saltpeter and sulfur, stirred into pitch, tar, and other combustible oils. The fireballs, a weapon Kane had used in past sieges, burned with an intense flame as they soared through the air--and on hitting they burst into dozens of fiery fragments. One such missile could burn a ship, or divert the greater part of the crew to fighting its spreading flames.

The only other cargo the unwieldy barges carried was a crew of slave rowers and a team of soldiers trained to man the catapults. These crafts were far too slow and awkward for any use except as seagoing artillery--and because of the danger of heavy seas, they could not be safely rowed very far from port.

Judging the Imperial fleet to be within range, Kane gave the signal to commence firing. Ten catapults lashed forth their long throwing arms--the recoil forcing the barges dangerously low into the sea. A rain of rocks and fireballs arched high through the air toward the oncoming fleet. At least half were far off the mark, but a few rocks fell among the fleet. Hurriedly the catapult crews rewound their instruments, adjusted the slings, and fired again.

The second volley was more deadly.

From his flagship, the Mon-Ossa, Lager watched in amazement as the trireme next to his took two of the fireballs at once. The blazing missiles splattered the decks and the men with a wave of clinging, inextinguishable flame.

"Forward, full speed!" Lager shouted. Battle pennants relayed his command, increasing the pace from ramming speed. The Thovnosian general seethed in frustration, for his fleet was still a good distance out of bowshot. "Full speed, forward--and close with them! We've got to get in where their catapults can't reach us! Archers! Fire as soon as we get in range! Silence those damned catapults!"

A massive stone smashed into a bank of oarsmen behind him, leaving a bloody, confused tangle of splintered timber and crushed flesh. Unsteadily, his ship veered into another's path as the slaves on the untouched side continued to row without break. The other warship slid past at spitting distance, its captain only narrowly avoiding collision. To Lager's left, a smaller warship took a fireball in its hold and began to belch great clouds of black smoke. Other vessels were flaming now across the wedge formation. And still the missiles fell relentlessly among them.

Lager bawled out orders and cursed the rowers for their laziness. The catapults had found their range at a good half-mile away. They were pounding his fleet into blazing wreckage, well beyond effective archery

range. Oars frothing the waves, the Imperial fleet bored through the deadly hail.

Kane observed with satisfaction the effects of the catapult barrage. By now the catapults were no longer firing in volley, but at will--as fast as their crews could reload. Already several of the Imperial warships were noticeably crippled--and four ships, two triremes included, burned out of control. A sudden rushing, ripping tear alerted Kane that Lages had ordered his archers to open fire--too soon, for their first volley fell short into the sea before the slowly backwatering barges.

"Move forward!" shouted Kane. "Ramming speed!" Battle pennants relayed his orders to the other warships. As the rebel navy surged forward to meet the Imperial fleet, Kane called for his own archers to prepare to fire. In a moment Lager's fleet would be at too close quarters for the retreating catapult barges to continue their attack. And then the rebel navy would speedily come into bowshot.

Kane laughed recklessly, senses inflamed with the thrill of battle. The decks were dashed with sand to blot the blood that would shortly make footing slippery. The mainmasts were unstepped--the impact of ramming would have sent them crashing onto the decks. Plowing through the sea under the rhythmic stroke of long cars, his fleet of warships bore down on the Imperials at a speed of some four knots. The dice had been cast, and the battle was upon them.

As the formations began to close now, a hail of arrows from the Imperial fleet fell upon the retreating line of barges. An iron-barbed shaft struck a crewman on one barge in the chest. Reeling in pain, he fell back against the brazier used to ignite the fireballs--knocking it into the barge's hold. The scattering coals instantly caught the remaining store of fireballs. With a sudden roar, the barge exploded into a spewing column of oily flame and shrieking men.

Undaunted by the hissing arrows, the rest of the catapult crews continued to fire--until their own warships advanced past them and into their line of fire. Useless in the close-quarters fighting, they withdrew to Prisarte before the Imperial fleet could take revenge for their murderous barrage.

The two fleets rushed together amidst a black rain of iron-barbed arrows and jagged rocks fired from small deck-mounted petraries. And through the hail of death they met.

A mighty Imperial trireme rammed a converted merchant that had rashly advanced before her sister warships--almost knocking its broken hull out of the water. Two biremes collided nearly head-on, leaving the rebel vessel crippled in the water and the other ship sinking. Cries of "Ramming speed!" were drowned out in a dreadful fury of splintering timber, screams of pain, and bestial roars.

Shouting orders savagely, Kane directed his flagship against the nearest enemy trireme. Reaching ramming speed, the rowers desperately hauled in their oars at the final instant--just as Kane skillfully heaved the ship's wheel to the right. The Ara-Teving veered aside from her opponent and glanced along her hull--splintering the oars and maiming the rowers on one side of the enemy warship. Still under momentum, the Ara-Teving shot past, then returned her own oars to the water and pulled away, leaving the Imperial warship dead in the water for the smaller vessels to swarm over.

Across the seething battleline, the rebel warships were attempting the same maneuver--not always with equal success. Unable to avoid her opponent's grappling irons, the Hast-Endab was trapped between two triremes before oars could be returned. As the grapples caught, a double wave of Imperial marines leaped onto her decks. Two converted merchants raced to the stricken warship's aid, and the ensuing conglomeration took on the appearance of a floating island. The air was torn with the cries of dying and injured combatants, the clash of arms, sounds of crashing and splintering timber. Arrows fell everywhere.

The Mon-Ossa advanced into the melee somewhat after the initial contact, as Lages had lost way until the crippled oarbank could be cleared. Sighting the Imperial flagship, Kane gave the order to ram, determined to take the warship and demoralize the Imperials with her defeat. Lages saw the rebel trireme bearing down on his ship, but the damaged oarbanks cost him some maneuverability. He sought to veer, but could not entirely evade the bronze-capped ram.

The two flagships smashed together, and with the thundering impact came the roaring battle cries of the soldiers. The two sides rushed upon each other as fierce hand-to-hand combat prevailed over both decks.

Kane leaped into the fray, his great sword cutting a path to the other ship. Confident that he could wield the long blade effectively with his left arm, he tossed aside his shield and ripped a cutlass from the side of a corpse, hefted it in his right hand. Although left-handed, Kane had trained himself to use his right arm with equal prowess. Having full use of both hands made Kane doubly deadly in a close fight--as those who tore at him quickly learned.

Driving back the enemy marines, Kane reached the high prow of the Ara-Teving and leaped onto the Mon-Ossa's decks. A host of Imperial soldiers rushed to meet him. Kane smashed down the first with his broadsword, briefly parried the blade of the second before finishing him with a sudden gutting slash of the cutlass, then whirled to spit a third marine on his broadsword. Shouting for his crew to follow him, Kane tore into the ranks of the Imperials, his two blades leaving a gory trail. Snarling faces and glittering blades whirled about him in a crimson vortex. It was close work for the first minutes. Kane's mail held true, though his bare flesh bled from minor gashes--cheap payment for the lives he took. Then his crew was spilling over the rails to give him support.

In the first wave, Arbas was fighting like a blood-mad panther. Recklessly the dark-haired assassin ripped into the Imperial marines. Kane wished he could find a lull to watch an artist at work--for the assassin's deadliness lay not only in his stealth, but in his raw fighting ability as well.

Calmly and deliberately, Kane slashed through the Imperial forces, his senses inflamed with the rush of battle and the ecstasy of killing. Much as he longed to lose himself in an orgy of death and carnage, Kane kept his blood-lust in check, and it was intellect, not emotion, that governed his actions.

An officer in the red cloak of an Imperial general broke through the reeling marines to hurl himself against Kane. "You must be Kane!" he shouted, swinging a vicious upward slash that Kane barely knocked aside. "Well then, know that I am Lages! Today I command this fleet, pirate! Tomorrow your death shall make me Emperor!"

"You will never be Emperor, then!" snarled Kane, and pressed his attack with increased fury. "But I'll give you a crown of good steel!"

Lages was an excellent swordsman, but Kane's lightning-swift, two-bladed attack baffled him. He had seen men fight with sword and dagger before, but never with two swords. And Kane wielded with complete ease a sword that most men would use with both hands. Taunts that sneered on his lips now passed unspoken as Lages struggled for breath. In spite of his skill, Lages found himself being forced back steadily to the ship's railing. For the first time his confidence began to waver. Had the weeks in prison so weakened him? Was this Kane truly the monster of old, against whom legend claimed no man could prevail?

But Lages was a strong man. His notched buckler continued to turn back the rain of blows Kane hammered against him, while his reddened blade stabbed to pierce his enemy's guard. In growing panic,

Lages realized that less and less was he on the offensive--that now he was hard pressed even to weave a defense against Kane's relentless attack. Grimly he sought to keep Kane's blades away from his aching flesh. His shield was being cut to pieces; his sword was dulled from parrying Kane's steel. Finally came one blinding-fast stroke that could not be parried. Kane's cutlass moved like reflected light and slashed across Lages's sword arm. In agony, Lages felt his sword arm go nerveless, his blade clatter to the slippery deck.

"Goodbye, Lages!" Kane laughed, and raised his broadsword for the killing blow. "Go join your fleet in hell!"

Frantically, Lages jumped back to avoid the blade, tripped over the ship's broken railing, and fell into the sea below. The waves slammed against him with stunning force, and the icy water closed above him. His armor weighted him down, dragging him under. Lages sank, struggling desperately to force his gashed arm to unbuckle his heavy cuirass.

"Lages is down! Lages is down!" The hopeless cry ran from ship to ship among the Imperials.

Kane started for the rail to make certain of his kill, but was swept back as a pack of vengeance-mad Imperial marines flung themselves against him. Fighting desperately, Kane needed all his strength to beat back their crazed onslaught, and for a timeless interval, steel clangoured against steel faster than mind or eye could follow. But their attack finally wavered before the figure of death they had centered upon, and from behind rebel soldiers quickly cut through to Kane's aid.

Then suddenly, there were no more to fight. The Imperial flagship was taken.

Kane wiped the sweat and gore from his face and gasped for breath. He stood covered with blood, some of it his own. But around him he could see that the tide of battle was with him. The catapult attack had broken the Imperial formation, and the glancing-ramming tactics had disabled enough of the warships for the smaller rebel craft to swarm over them. Dismayed by the fall of their flagship, the survivors of Lages's fleet would fight for retreat, not victory.

Kane grinned. It began to look as if his efforts on Efre's behalf had not been in vain.

Arbas came up, limping badly, a crude bandage soaked with blood decorating his thigh. "Come on, Kane! This ship is sinking! Oh, shit! Some son of a bitch damn near cut my leg off! Damn, was that a fight!"

"Damn!" Kane frowned at the assassin's crimson trouser leg. "Looks like someone cut you straight to the artery! Get a tighter bandage on that mess before you bleed to death! And we're not through this fight yet, Arbas."

Kane bellowed to his men. "Back to the Ara-Teving, men! Bring whatever of our wounded you see! Get the lead out, damn it! Hurry!"

Giving Arbas a hand, Kane left the sinking Mon-Ossa. The assassin was cursing with each step, but still game. Kane decided his femoral artery was spared--otherwise Arbas would have bled out by now. The Ara-Teving backed away from the wreck and moved to another quarter of the battle. A rebel bireme and an Imperial trireme were locked in combat nearby, and Kane gave the order to ram the enemy warship. As the Ara-Teving rowed away, no one gave a thought to a bleeding figure who floated on a piece of wreckage in their wake. The water was filled with such.

Lages clutched the broken timber and tried to paddle with his good arm. The salt water was like acid on his slashed arm, and he cursed with breath better saved for swimming. He could not die here now! Not with so much to live for! His fleet lay stricken about him--already assuming that their leader was dead, as the Mon-Ossa lifted her stern and sank. Had Lages not won free of his armor, he would be lying on the bottom a thousand fathoms below. Withal, at the moment there seemed small odds of escaping either drowning or capture. He desperately looked about him for aid.

At this point Lages caught sight of an Imperial trireme--by some miracle unscathed in the melee--rowing straight toward him. The trireme had dispatched the two rebel vessels that had tried to take it and was now steering for another quarter of the battle.

Lages waved with his good arm and shouted hoarsely. Rescue? In horror, he realized that he lay directly in the vessel's path. "By Horment, no!" he prayed. "Don't let me die, run down by my own men!"

But someone aboard the Imperial warship recognized the thrashing figure in the water--thanks to the scarlet cloak that Lages had flung across the broken timber as he struggled to cling to it. The trireme slowed under momentum and swerved before it could hit him. Lages caught the rope they threw to him and clambered aboard.

"Thank Horment!" he gasped. "And thanks to all of you here! You won't go unrewarded for this! Who's captain here?"

An officer ran up--Lages recognized him as one of his old comrades. "Oh, it's you, Gable!" Lages laughed shakily. "Your ship has saved me from becoming fish food, and I won't forget that!"

"I thought we were hauling a ghost on board, milord," Gable told him. "The Mon-Ossa lies on the bottom, and men say Kane sent you there to captain her."

Lages swore. "I'll settle with Kane another time. But what do you think of the battle? What's happened since I was given up for dead?"

"It goes against us, milord," Gable answered glumly. "Other than our ship, I can see only two biremes that are still moving freely. The fireballs hurt us bad. Now these damned rebels have us hemmed in--they're grappling and are overwhelming the rest of our fleet that is still afloat."

"I feared as much!" groaned Lages. "So it's hopeless, then. Kane is the devil that legend declares him to be! All right, signal the retreat. We'll try to get back to Thovnosten with what we can save."

The lone Imperial trireme moved away from the battle, and fled for Thovnosten. The two biremes and several other crippled warships tried to follow suit--but the rebel fleet closed in, and only one bireme was able to escape. No chase was given--as the rebels were too busy massacring the survivors of the Imperial fleet.

And so out of twenty-four proud ships, two limped back to Thovnosten, leaving the rest to the victors and to the sea.

Meanwhile the rebel forces were inexorably overwhelming ship after ship of those trapped by their grappling irons. And as each craft was taken, the victorious rebels moved on to reinforce their comrades on board another stricken warship. The Imperial marines fought gallantly, but their position was hopeless, and the wise ones surrendered their ships for whatever mercy they might find in Prisarte.

Having finished with her second opponent, the Ara-Teving drove on against another. In yet one area of the battle, the issue was going against the rebels. The Ara-Teving's sister ship, the Kelkin, was caught between two Imperial triremes, and the Imperial soldiers were slowly beating down the outmanned rebels. Despite his feelings about Alremas, Kane could not risk losing the best warship next to his own in Efre's entire navy.

Kane ordered the attack, thinking by fighting to save Alremas he might at best achieve some stature among the aloof Pellinites. At his command, the Ara-Teving pulled alongside one Imperial trireme and quickly grappled. Leading his crew, Kane rushed over the rails to attack the Imperial marines from behind. Giving them little time to realize this new threat, Kane burst into the enemy ranks, hewing about him with his twin blades. The Imperial marines gave back and faltered under the renewed rebel strength. Their apparent victory now cruelly loomed as defeat. With the rage of a cornered beast, they fought to the death without regard for wounds or danger.

To his disgust, Kane saw that Oxfor Alremas was still fighting--Kane had hoped the Imperials would kill the Pellin lord for him and save him from a thorny problem. Grudgingly, he admired the Pellinite's intricate swordplay. The man fenced with brilliance, and there was speed and endurance within that foppish frame. Kane had not thought Alremas tough enough for a melee such as this. If only the bastard weren't too popular a figure to murder, Kane mused with regret. Arbas would handle that matter most willingly. On Kane fought, striking death all about him. Alremas would wait until another day. For now there was the dirty, bloody work of mopping up the last of the stubborn resistance. At length the fighting ceased. The last Imperial soldier had fallen or surrendered.

A weary cheer went through the rebel ranks. Half their number lay dead or badly wounded, and half their warships were broken wreckage. But the captured Imperial warships would more than replace the loss of their fighting ships, and more soldiers could always be found. It had been a decisive victory over a more powerful, better-equipped enemy, and the men had a right to be jubilant.

Sensing the popular feeling, Kane presented himself upon the prow of his flagship. Kane was now an even more awe-inspiring figure--his mail hauberk torn, his bare arms and face gashed, his body splattered with blood from helm to toe. He raised his gory broadsword in salute to the men he had led to victory.

Amidst wild cheers of "Hail, Kane! Hail, Kane! Hail, Red Kane!" he led his fleet in a triumphant return to Prisarte. It was with secret satisfaction that Kane noted it was his name and not Efre's that the men roared out in adulation.

PART THREE

XIX

Return to Thovnosten

Netisten Maril was in a volcanic temper--his most common mood when confronted by any obstacle. "Only two ships return! By Horment! By the thrice-damned Tloluvin! This is intolerable--impossible! How could Kane deal such a smashing defeat to the imperial navy! By Lato, I knew I should have commanded the expedition myself. You let a mob of rebels and pirates rout the finest warships on the Western Sea!"

Trying to keep his own temper in check, Lages stonily listened to his uncle's raging. His wounds were giving him pain, and each time he tried without success to break into Maril's stream of invective, his own temper flared. At length, Maril ran out of breath and lapsed into fitful silence, his livid face twisted in uncomprehending dismay.

Bitterly Lages began, "All right, so we took a beating. Well, a tantrum won't reverse things, and if you want to scream curses at anyone, then take your anger out on Kane. The men fought valiantly throughout the battle, and I doubt that you could have commanded them better yourself. We tried to take Efre by surprise, and we made a mistake. Kane was waiting for us with a far stronger fleet than we had ever anticipated. He used a few ingenious tricks to offset our superior fleet, and we got hit bad. Now we've shown our hand, lost a significant portion of our total naval strength, and let Kane win a tremendous strategic victory as well. Okay, it was your idea to attempt a sudden attack--I'm not saying I wouldn't have ordered the same. The strategy failed, and let's leave it at that!"

Unappeased, Maril muttered an incoherent snarl as an attempt to reply, then subsided. He smoothed his black beard while he continued to glower at his nephew.

Hurriedly Lages continued. "So let's take stock of things. We know we have a major rebellion on our hands--a plot that has been taking shape for many months. Now we know where its center is, and who its leaders are. The battle will have drawn everything into the open. Now that open warfare has broken out, we can assume that Efre will summon to Pellin all the aid that has been promised to her through secret alliances. Kane's victory is going to pull in a wave of support from those more cautious traitors who were undecided before--so the witch will probably have a considerable following once the news of our defeat tempts shaky loyalties. And with Kane as her general, Efre's rebellion constitutes as deadly a threat to us and to our Empire as the Netisten blood has ever faced.

"Now then, we lost twenty-two ships and maybe five thousand men and slaves. But this only represents about half of Thovnos's navy, when you consider the warships that were out on patrol or otherwise unavailable at the time we sailed. Then, if we make a real effort, we can convert a good number of merchant vessels to warships and man them with freshly recruited troops. That was Kane's own game, so we know that it works. So much for Thovnos itself. Now, we can call upon the lords of all the islands in the Empire to render their support, since Efre does pose a threat to the entire Empire. I doubt if her conspiracy can have netted too much support from among the great houses, so we can probably assume that Tresli, Fisitia, Josten, Quarnora, Raconos, and Parwi will remain loyal--along with many of the lesser islands. Counting their support, I'd estimate we can mobilize a fleet of maybe three hundred warships, plus around another hundred serviceable conversions and the like.

"The rebels took heavy losses, too. I'd be surprised if Kane can muster a hundred ships of all descriptions--and he'll be hard pressed to man them in any fashion. So we can probably count on outnumbering the rebels a good four to one, maybe better. That means this first defeat hasn't cost us the war by any means. We'll gather our forces, go back to Pellin with a real invasion fleet, and level that damned witch's fortress to the ground!

"But let's worry about that tomorrow. I've hardly slept for days. I'm exhausted and I ache all over. So if you'll forgive me, dear uncle, I'm going to my chambers.

Without waiting any further, Lages wheeled and stalked from the audience hall. Maril muttered a few dark thoughts about insolent youths and fell into gloomy thought.

Lages was painfully removing his battle-stained clothing when M'Cori burst into his chambers. "M'Cori!" he smiled. "Held it a second." He shrugged a clean, loose-fitting shirt across his grimy shoulders and started to shove the tails back under his belt.

Ignoring his efforts to look presentable, M'Cori hurried his bodyservant out of the room. "I had to come and see you right away. Oh, Lages--I thank all the gods that you've come back! Everyone is talking about the disaster--about Efre's vow of revenge! I heard that Kane almost killed you--that they almost didn't see you in the water!" She fell into his arms, trembling violently.

Lages held her close, disregarding the pain in his arm. For a while they stood in a tight embrace, Lages murmuring soothingly in her ear. Eventually they kissed.

"And Kane," began M'Cori, in control of herself again, "they say that he truly is that Kane whose legendary pirate hordes almost conquered the Empire in the first years of our history. They say Efre has brought him back from the dead to create an invincible army for her conspiracy."

"That I can believe, now that I've seen him!" Lages exclaimed. "The man isn't human! He looked like some sort of demon of death out there--all covered with blood, and with that insane light in his killer's eyes! He was slaughtering our men like sheep. In battle Kane was as much within his element as a shark in the sea we fought upon--and just as deadly."

M'Cori gasped, and Lages went on reassuringly, "But that's all nonsense about him. I know he's human enough. He was definitely wounded in several places. An incredible warrior he may be, with an uncanny resemblance to Red Kane the pirate, but this Kane is no supernatural demon from out of the past. I know his measure now, and when we meet again, I'll kill him--no matter who he really is. I'll make you a matched set of drinking mugs from his skull and from Efre's."

M'Cori seemed entranced at the thought. "Ugh! That's a gruesome present! You've been paying too much attention to those gory old sagas the minstrels wail. How could anyone drink out of a skull--even those wild heroes in the tales! It wouldn't hold water even. That's an awful idea, Lages. Give them to Father instead."

Her mind wasn't half on her words, Lages knew. He was very much aware of her thinly gowned figure pressing against his bare chest. Dreamily it seemed as though her heart beat in cadence with his own--possibly that was why his own pulse was throbbing. He thought about all the years he had known

M'Cori, wondered when there had been a time that he had not loved her. He had been an utter fool to have let the tumultuous events of the past few years interfere with their relationship. Those years were lost forever now, he realized, and the future was uncertain. How many times had death come within a breath of costing him the years to come?

Lages whispered to her then, not daring to raise his voice for fear it would shake. "Listen to me, M'Cori! When this is all over, Maril should be reconciled with me. And I'm through with this blood feud now. I'll no longer be a fugitive; I won't be a landless traitor's son, trying to prove himself worthy of the Emperor's grace. I'm going to ask Maril for your hand, M'Cori--and I know he'll consent."

He looked at her with painful intensity, as if he would hear her thoughts before she could form the words. "And will you have me? Will you be my wife, M'Cori?"

M'Cori clasped him with fierce passion. The words had been formed years before. "Oh, Lages--beloved! You know the answer to that!"

She kissed him deeply. For the next minutes Lages forgot all about his exhaustion and pain. Forgot about the web of darkness whose patterns were not yet completely woven.

XX

From the Ancient Seas

Late one night several days after the battle, Kane sat reading over reports in the tower room he had chosen for his headquarters. Assuming that repairs on the captured warships and others could be completed in time, his fleet had about broken even--maybe better, since the acquisition of a few first-class warships more than made up for the loss of many of the less serviceable craft. Casualties had been high, though, which was more serious. A lot of replacements had to be found. Common soldiers were not too hard to scare up, but trained officers were another story.

Assuming Arbas recovered in time, he could probably be trusted with a command. The assassin was a loner, Kane knew, but he was a formidable swordsman, and as such could command the respect and obedience of his men--making him a good battle leader, even though he cared for none of the responsibilities of long-term leadership. Arbas just might be talked into it, Kane reflected, if he could appeal to the assassin's ego. And perhaps Imel could persuade some more of his acquaintances to come over to his side. The aristocracy had all the experience and mystique needed to command--the common folk were used to taking orders from their superiors. The same tradition of subservience to the nobility

caused problems with promotions from the ranks.

Kane laid the papers aside. Some sixth sense detected the presence of Efreel even before his keen hearing caught the clump of her wooden leg on the stairs. What cause drove her up such a difficult climb, he wondered? He had chosen this tower room for his study partly because it made such excursions inconvenient for Efreel.

Kane considered his relationship with the sorceress a difficult one. At present she was altogether pleased with him, but catering to the whims of a madwoman taxed even Kane's nerves. Her attitude of elaborate secrecy and incessant insinuation annoyed him far more than he cared to show, and her unpredictable seizures of raving insanity were trying, to say the least. Kane's jaded senses found slight fascination in seeking to satisfy Efreel's almost bestial lusts, but there always persisted a deeper feeling of disgust that could not be dispelled. Unconsciously Kane found himself counting each step of the passageway by the echoing thump of Efreel's demon's-paw limb. There was an almost hypnotic rhythm to her progress, he decided.

Soon Efreel's maimed figure limped through the doorway. He looked at her expectantly. "Good evening, Kane," she began in her strange voice--beautiful tones as mutilated as her nightmarish body. "So I find you here working late hours like a clerk."

"A good general should know his strengths and weakness to the smallest detail," Kane stated, somewhat annoyed. Actually it had been insomnia, not diligence, that kept him here so late. "Success in battle isn't won by accepting the standards and incompetence of others. So many hot-headed amateurs think wars are fought by throwing two armies together and letting justice and the gods grant victory to their cause. My sword has dulled its edge on such fools, settled causes past counting."

"Don't take offense--I was only jesting. Certainly, after last week's victory I have no criticisms either of your ability or your philosophy."

Efreel sank into a chair beside Kane. "But I came to tell you that Imel has once more proved his worth to me. Another of his highborn friends has yielded to his persuasion. Imel has just informed me that Lord Gall of Tresli has thrown his lot in with us. He's the most powerful lord on that island, as you should know, and he'll come to us presently with a fleet of eighteen warships. I must find some new way to show Imel my appreciation."

Kane smiled. "There's a coincidence--I was just wondering if Imel might come through for us. Buy him a new wardrobe, and he'll win over all of Tresli. But this is good news. I've needed a fresh fleet to guard Pellin's waters--in case Maril sends another expedition sooner than expected. If I were in his place, I'd attempt a raid of, some sort--a quick strike to disrupt operations in Prisarte. But after the beating we gave Lages, I imagine Maril will wait to bring the entire might of the Imperial navy against us before he mounts another attack."

"Offers of aid are pouring in from every quarter," Efreel exulted. "Every adventurous rogue, every greedy nobleman, all those who have cause to hate the house of Netisten--they are rallying to me as news of our victory spreads throughout the Empire."

The sorceress paused to gloat, and her eye caught sight of the puckered seams of the minor gashes Kane had suffered in the battle. Strange, she mused, only slight scabs or pinkish scars marked them now. So the immortal had strong recuperative powers, as well. She recalled the demon's words that Kane could receive no permanent scar, since his body never altered from its original state. Considering his past career, she wondered whether his body might not otherwise be as scarred as her own. It was pleasant to

think that another creature might live through such mutilation.

Kane was speaking. "Yes, I can see that response to our cause is mounting. But, as Hedusi complained:

Speak no more to me of numbers,

'Though truth, your words are lies--

I fill my goblet drop by drop,

While you pour from the amphora."

"I've never heard the proverb in that form before," returned Efre.

Kane had forgotten the passage's antiquity. Vexed at having been trapped into pedantry, he told her bitterly, "It isn't a proverb originally. It's a familiar quotation from one of Gorovin's plays. Don't tell me that Gorovin's work has been lost here in the East."

"So Kane is a scholar as well as a warrior. How unusual! We must talk together at length over the knowledge you've acquired over the centuries." Efre had caught Kane's unconscious reference to the Thovnosian Empire as the East. This was clearly the West with respect to the Lartroxian supercontinent, and if Kane had not merely made a slip of the tongue... She wondered how long Kane had lived in the semi-mythical lands beyond the Western Sea.

"You wouldn't like Gorovin," Kane said caustically. "No one ever gets flayed alive in his plays. But my meaning should be clear--certainly I've repeated myself often enough. We can't take on Netisten Maril and the entire Empire with just bits and pieces from here and there--not when he has the resources of his Empire to draw upon. Why, most of these recruits we've gathered since the battle are useless against seasoned troops. Just sword-meat to waste the strength of the Imperial forces. If I'm to be of any real use to you, I'm going to have to be told exactly what manner of supernatural powers you've made an allegiance with. Tell me what this mysterious force is that you've so devilishly hinted of all along. Then maybe I can make plans accordingly."

Efre laughed wildly, and for a moment Kane feared that she was entering into another of her spells of incoherent madness. But the sorceress was merely enjoying her moment of triumph, and presently she grew calmer. Efre must have been anticipating the unveiling of this final mystery for some time, judging from her secret amusement. She assumed a grimace that her torn features interpreted as a mysterious smile--Kane had grown to recognize the expression--and asked: "What do you know of the Scylredi?"

Though the direction Efre's revelation was taking was not an unsuspected one, Kane remained impassive. His thoughts at that moment might have shaken the sorceress, but he only said, "I have heard a few bizarre tales of the Scylredi from the seamen of this region. Some sort of malevolent sea gods, they say."

Efre tittered scornfully. "Yes, so they say. Garbled legends and old wives' tales. They are but frightened guesses--pale shadows of the hidden truth. Listen, Kane!

"In the eons before man walked the earth--when the sea was a vast, teeming wilderness of primitive life, its oceans far more immense than those of today--the race of creatures known to mankind as the Scylredi arose and flourished. Most of the continents we know today had not yet risen from the primeval sea, and only a few jungle-choked land masses stood out from the boundless seas of Elder Earth. The

Scylredi lived beneath this ancient sea and created for themselves a civilization beyond man's wildest conception. Here in this very region they built their cities, for at that time all these islands lay upon the ocean floor.

"They were a strange race, these creatures of awesome antiquity. Nothing on earth truly resembled them, even then. Were they some freak of evolution, a race from another world--or perhaps, like man, the result of some insane god's whimsy? Who can say at this distant age? The most ancient writings that I have studied are uncertain on so many points. But then, this earth has held many strange races about which mankind can only speculate, and all but a fragment of the secrets of prehuman history has been lost forever.

"Whatever their origin, the Scylredi were as gods themselves. They had control of powers both natural and supernatural. They used the great beasts of the primordial sea for their own purposes, controlling fantastic monsters known to mankind only through legend. With their knowledge of the physical sciences, they built great submarine seacraft--unearthly engines in which they traveled the oceans and waged war with the other inhuman races of Elder Earth. That age was a far more violent world than the earth of our day, and there were many powerful forces the prehuman races must constantly contend against in the battle to survive. They were versed in the elder sorceries, as well--the secrets of the gulfs beyond our stars--and legend only hints at some of the hideous deeds that were committed by the Scylredi in their wars.

"Magnificent fortresses they raised--huge basalt structures that surpassed human imagination. The ruins of these great castles can be seen today--on hillsides where they have crumbled for millennia, ever since the waters receded from these islands. This very fortress, Dan-Legeh, is their creation. For the Scylredi, it is only a minor citadel, and built after their race had declined. It was an age of giants, and the Scylredi commanded both sorcery and science in their constant battle for supremacy in that prehistoric age of chaos.

"But as the centuries passed, their power slipped from them. Perhaps it was the shrinking of the great seas, or the cooling of the earth that caused their decline. It is recorded that there was a long period of horrific warfare between the Scylredi and some other race of elder beings. The conflict was waged with weapons of unimaginable power. Many of their colossal basalt castles were blasted into fused rubble, their gigantic seacraft destroyed, their fearsome servants annihilated, and the greater part of the Scylredi were killed. Both races lay near to extinction upon the termination of that war, and the scattered survivors were left to mourn amidst the ruins of their vanished civilizations.

"Then mighty quakes and tremors shook the earth. Mountains rose from the muck, and great cracks split apart the ocean floor. The waters receded, as the ocean floor buckled and heaved forth to form new lands. The ruins of the Scylredi's titanic fortresses were left to moulder in the sun. And Dan-Legeh itself finally emerged, to dry beneath lonely grey skies until the day some centuries-removed ancestor of mine conquered his superstitious fears and adapted the fortress for his own use. Surely you have noticed the alienness of this citadel. The innumerable additions and modifications man has made--new walls and chambers, stairways and ceilings--they can't disguise this inhuman heritage.

"As for the Scylredi themselves, their numbers were dwindling. Creatures of preternaturally long lives, they were slow to reproduce--but this was only a fragment of their dilemma. Most of the great beasts that had served them were dead; their fortresses were virtually destroyed, as were the strange machines they had created. Their power broken, the Scylredi were too weakened to confront that hostile age. As time passed, they were not prepared to cope with the changing world--and after the oceans receded, their remnants withdrew into the depths of the Sorn-Ellyn, to the north of what is today Pellin.

"Here in this deep trench whose abyss has never been plumbed, the last survivors of this once mighty race yet dwell. Few men have guessed that they still survive, or that there is truth to the many legends concerning these vanished sea demons. Seldom do they venture forth, and the seas over this abyss are shunned by the wise. Still, it is not uncommon to hear tales whispered among the seamen of poor fools who have strayed into the Sorn-Ellyn and paid horribly for their trespass. The Scylredi care little for the puny race of man--the weaklings who fell heir to their ancient home.

"But I have not been bound by human ignorance or weakness. Through my sorceries I have established contact with the Scylredi. I have learned to communicate with them, and have drawn them to me from their lair in the depths of the Sorn-Ellyn. Far below this fortress is cut from the bedrock a gigantic chamber. You have seen my pretty toys there on the day we played with that fat little spy. Here also is where I perform my incantations and rituals of the black arts. But the chamber has other uses than you may have guessed. Located there is a circular pool. I saw you peering into it; it is very deep, this pool--bottomless, to be truthful. For the pool is nothing less than one end of a tremendous tunnel that runs beneath this island and terminates within the Sorn-Ellyn. The Scylredi cut this and other such tunnels through the rock beneath our feet in the age when Dan-Legeh was still their citadel. Through this tunnel I am able to communicate with the Scylredi at will.

"It is through the Scylredi that I have been able to keep in close touch with the maneuvers of my enemies. Here, too, lies the secrets of the fortuitous disasters -which have destroyed a few of those who sought to, invade my waters, or to escape the island. It is to the Scylredi that I look for aid against Netisten Maril. With their assistance I shall be avenged in full. Not even the entire might of the Empire can stand before the power of the Scylredi, when they arise to my command!

"For although they have kept from the sight of man for centuries in that great abyss, they are not stripped of all the power that once was theirs. Not all of their undersea craft have been destroyed. They have fantastic machines, built by an alien science of a scope far beyond human comprehension. Colossal metal ships that move at tremendous speed beneath the sea, propelled by a power that is not pure magic but of a science which even they no longer fully understand. They have weapons that can burn right through the stoutest warship. Their submarine craft can lash out with fearful streams of elemental flame--controlled bolts of energy that can blast to cinders all that they strike. True, they have only a few of these seacraft, and the power that drives them is almost exhausted, but a small number of such weapons can destroy countless warships.

"And they still have a number of their great sea creatures under their command. Alongside us will fight creatures known only in the most dread legends--the Oraycha. Many tales are spread of the Oraycha, the primeval monsters of whom the octopus and squid are only puny descendants. Only a few of these gigantic beasts survive today, but whatever regions these creatures haunt are seas over which no sane man dare sail. It is no, lurid myth that an Oraycha can drag down an entire ship in its tentacles. With their alien science, the Scylredi have been laboring to produce devices that will enable the Oraycha to distinguish my ships from the enemy fleet. The Oraycha will be able to range beneath our embattled navies--to ensnare and annihilate any warship that lacks a protective talisman.

"This then is the power to which I have sworn allegiance. The Scylredi are the source of my secret strength--the power I shall wield to complete my vengeance. What do you think now, Kane? With such allies as these, can Netisten Maril stand before me? Efrell shall be Empress of a new Empire, and the Scylredi shall lend an invincible might to my rule!"

Kane had been listening intently throughout, but if he felt astonishment at anything Efrell told him, he kept his emotions hidden. His voice held no hint of amazement or uncertainty, although his thoughts were in considerable turmoil. "If the Scylredi truly come up to your expectations, then perhaps you will be

Empress of the island Empire," he acceded. "But I would like to see personally what the Scylredi have to offer us, though. Obviously their powers are limited, or you would never have relied on my own efforts for your cause."

Efrel giggled. "Jealous, Kane? But I still require human warriors, as well. And you shall see the Scylredi, if you wish--if you are prepared to confront a nightmare from earth's dreaming infancy."

Kane ignored her taunt and pressed on. "But what really interests me about your secret alliance comes down to this: Why should the Scylredi aid you? These are no demons that you can command with spells and conjurations. What have you offered these creatures in return for their intercession?"

She eyed him slyly before explaining. "I told you that the Scylredi are god-like. Alorri-Zrokros even postulates that they are gods, fallen from the sky to dwell on earth. And it is natural that gods require worship. Fallen gods or fallen devils--they still dream of ancient glory. The Scylredi have speculated that through their elder sorcery and the rituals of mass worship, they will be restored to their original power. Worshipped as gods, they will become gods once more. It is evident that a god draws strength from the supernatural bonds that link the faithful to him. The Scylredi mean to absorb the psychic energies of untold thousands of neophytes.

"And so the answer to your question should be obvious. The Scylredi shall help me to fulfill my revenge, to achieve my ambition to rule as Empress--and in return I shall establish the worship of the Scylredi as the one religion of the new Empire. Efrel shall be Empress; the Scylredi shall be gods. Ah, they have told me of the rituals they will require--and they're magnificent! I shall be priestess as well as Empress. They will demand numerous human sacrifices, of course. You should see what the Scylredi can do with a living human, Kane! A few spies have already learned."

She doubled with a fit of insane laughter. "Think of it! Was ever an Empire bought more cheaply? Only for a yearly payment of a few hundred lives. It's absurdly cheap--more than that starve to death every week in the Empire. Well, how about it, Kane? You sit there so quietly. Does the bargain seem too repulsive?"

Kane smiled thinly. "I think you know enough about my past to realize that human life means nothing to me. And what manner of demons you choose to make your pact with is your own affair. My only apprehension concerns whether you can trust the Scylredi to carry through with their part of the bargain. Supernatural weapons have often proved unwieldy, I have learned."

Still tittering, Efrel rose and hobbled to the doorway. "Yes, I knew you would be the last to get cold feet over this alliance. You only complain of distrust, where sane men should feel overwhelming dread." Pausing at the stairs, she shot back, "Imagine--Kane scrupling over taking human life!" She limped on down the stairway, her maddened laughter rising back after her.

Kane sat on the window ledge for a long time after, looking out over the darkened sea. The Scylredi. There had been certain hints of such an alliance--ones he should have pursued further than he had. Those statues he had barely glimpsed by the pool beneath Dan-Legeh were one thing that had made him suspect Efrel's secret. There had been other such hints, but such an alliance had seemed too alien to be credible. Kane had feared that something unforeseen might complicate matters for him--a force entering the picture that he could not control, a factor defying manipulation.

He had seen a Scylred once long ago--a long-dead one floating in the sea. Kane had recognized it primarily from the description given by Alorri-Zrokros in his ancient treatise on the prehuman races, Book of the Elders.

Death could not have made the bloated form much uglier. It had been more than half again as large as a man, and vaguely analogous to man in form. Only where legs should have been, its lower trunk sprouted six thick tentacles, and likewise from its upper trunk grew two longer tentacles in place of arms. Alorri-Zrokros claimed that these tentacles were armed with suckers that could draw the lifeblood from its victim. He had dwelled upon the creature's feeding habits with customary morbid detail. At the other end of the central trunk, where the head should be, was a short projection that was encircled near its extremity with half a dozen or more eyes. At the base of this grotesque head was a large, gaping toothless cavity that served the function vaguely of a mouth. Water was drawn in here, passed over gill bars, and jetted out from the base of the trunk. Like the octopus the creature resembled, the Scylred was capable of Jetting through the water at considerable velocity. An altogether hideous creature from the earth's infancy, and if Alorri-Zrokros could be believed, its soul was even more monstrous.

Withal, it was not this that bothered Kane--although he bore universal hatred and distrust toward all forms of gods. What now disturbed him was the realization that here was a means by which Efrek might dispose of him should the occasion arise--or more likely, a factor that would complicate his disposing of Efrek. For to remain in a secondary position was utterly alien to Kane's nature. And Kane knew that the defeat of Netisten Maril would only be the first phase of the crimson pattern fate was weaving for the days to come.

XXI

Of Games and Goals

There was a thin wind blowing from the sea, carrying away some of the stench of the waterfront, but not much. The stars were high and lost beneath cloud. Enough of the moon was left to show the cobbled streets.

Imel led the way through the moonlit streets. His stride was quick and nervous. "I thought I'd see if you could do something with him," he said. "You're his friend. You know his moods."

"Some of them, I guess," Arbas grunted, limping to keep pace with the renegade.

"I thought I ought to do something," Imel muttered. "Does he get like this very often?"

Arbas shrugged. "I don't really know him that well. But I've seen him like this a few times. He gets this way when the mood is on him. Doesn't sleep, starts smoking too much opium, washes it down with too

much brandy. Any other man would be out cold for a week, but Kane..."

"Here," said Imel, indicating the waterfront dive. There was no sign over the door, but the smell of sour wine and stale vomit and urine was familiar to the assassin. He cautiously pushed past the filthy leather curtain and peered into the darkened interior. A man's body lay across the threshold, smashed and crumpled. Arbas stepped over it.

"Kane?" he called softly.

The figure who reclined across the tavern bar lifted his head. "Come on in, Arbas," Kane muttered.

The assassin entered the poorly lit common room. Imel followed uneasily. There was another broken body lying amidst the wreckage of a table.

"Looks like you've got the place all to yourself," Arbas observed.

"Almost," Kane agreed. He lifted the bottle to his lips, drank, and tossed it to Arbas. A thin-faced whore handed him another from behind the bar. Her eyes darted anxiously from the newcomers' faces to Kane's.

"The tavern keeper left," Kane said. "My friend here has been telling me her life story. It's very interesting."

"What are you doing?" Arbas asked casually, passing the bottle to Imel.

"I was looking for a quiet place to get drunk." The girl's face was abnormally pallid beneath its rouge. Arbas glanced down and saw a third body sprawled behind the bar at her feet.

"Some quiet place," the assassin commented.

"It got a lot quieter after a while," Kane told him.

Imel sighed and slumped onto a bench. His men had reported the brawl to him. By then Kane had been recognized, and by that time there was no longer reason to interfere. While it might be permissible for a general to have a drink with the rank and file, the renegade was uncertain as to the propriety of brawling with them.

Kane frowned at Imel's troubled face. "Drink up," he invited. "You look upset. Want to borrow my girl friend?"

The idea brought a harsh laugh from Kane. He rolled off the bar, gathered a fresh bottle in each huge fist, and made his way across the littered room. He was still laughing as he slid into a chair at a corner table.

Arbas nodded to Imel, and the two drew up chairs beside Kane. The whore watched uncertainly from behind the dirty bar, eyeing the doorway.

"Kane, you're getting too old for this," Arbas said sarcastically.

Kane's laughter rumbled in his chest, around the mouth of the upturned bottle.

"Arbas," said Kane, "you ever make it with a one-legged lady?"

The assassin shook his head and tilted back his own bottle.

"Imel." Kane turned to the Thovnosian. "You ever made it with a one-legged lady?"

Imel took a long pull from his bottle, hoping grimly that there were no other ears within hearing. The brandy made the sordid room seem to glow, and suddenly he began to laugh with Kane.

"Time was," Kane began, pushing his other bottle toward his companions. "Time was, when an Empress took you to her bed, it was something worth fighting for. Go out the next day, spill your gifts all over the field of battle--what the hell, let's die for the kisses of her imperial highness. Why not? Men die for stupider causes. But this..."

Arbas was laughing now as well. The whore slipped from behind the bar and fled into the night. No one paid her heed.

"Imel," Kane muttered, "your girl friend got away"

"She was too thin," the Thovnosian allowed, working on his second bottle.

"All those poor old heroes of legend," Kane mourned. "Gone out and died for their lady's love. All we three got between us is a one-legged madwoman, and I can't even give her away."

"Got to be a better reason than that for getting killed," Imel agreed.

"Well, what's your reason?" Kane asked.

"Best reason of all," the renegade answered with drunken candour. "I'm fighting for myself. Things work out right--by the time this is all over, I'll be one of the greatest lords in the new Empire. Lands and riches, power and prestige. No more putting up with sneers from the likes of Oxfors Alremas. My blood is as good as the proudest of them--all I need is the wealth and the power."

"If you live to enjoy it," Arbas said cheerfully. He returned from the bar with a fresh round of heavy green bottles.

"I threw my lot in with the winning side," Imel rejoined. "I know the risks. Every goal worth striving for has its price."

"And the trick is to avoid paying the price," the assassin grinned.

Imel toasted him. "I'll risk it. So what was there worth living for otherwise? But what about you, Arbas? You with your boasts of having studied at the great university at Nostoblet. Why does a would-be philosopher leave the dusty libraries and lecture halls to sell his blade for bloodstained gold?"

"Same reason you offer, Imel," Arbas drawled. "I'm just a bit more selective about whom I kill than your average soldier of fortune. Lucrative work, though it doesn't carry the glory of battlefield slaughter."

"Then what are you doing here with Kane?"

"Well, why not? I'm getting paid."

"That's no answer."

"It's as good as any. Hell, does any man really control his fate? Does he ever really know why he does what he does? We act out the dramas that the gods place us in, follow the web of our fates--and what matter the reasons we rationalize to explain our lives and our actions?"

Imel belched. "Horment! You should have stayed at the university. But what about you, Kane? Can you explain why you're here? Or are you going to spout philosophical nonsense like Arbas here?"

Kane laughed bitterly. "It's a game I play. An old game with an old enemy. And tonight I find I grow weary of it."

He was on his feet and through the door before they quite realized he was moving. They scrambled after him, following his mordant laughter through the darkness.

XXII

Up from the Abyss

Under sail, the Ara-Teving stabbed her bronze ram through the black waves of the Sorn-Ellyn. Half a mile to her starboard, the bleak cliffs of Pellin's northern coast thrust into the star-flecked night. A scatter of fish-scale clouds drifted high across the lonely moon. The trireme had sailed from Prisarte that dawn. Nightfall found the Ara-Teving cutting across the unfathomed waters of the Sorn-Ellyn.

"This is the place," Efrei told Kane.

The Ara-Teving lost headway as Kane gave the order to take in sail. The trireme drifted slowly in the thin wind. Efrei, bundled in a hooded cloak of ermine, made her way to the prow and stood there silently at the rail, staring out across the jet-black sea.

Arbas followed her gaze. "So this is where we were to meet our new allies," he remarked dubiously. "When you told me what Efrei had in mind, I was startled that you would accept at face value the ravings of a madwoman. Now that I'm out here, I'm not so skeptical. Were it not for the black line of cliffs off there, I'd swear we were adrift on the seas of hell. No wonder even the Pellinites shun these waters!"

"The bottom of the sea here is as close to the floor of hell as you'll ever see in this life," Kane murmured.

"As for the Scylredi and their giant pets, they still haunt these waters--make no doubt. We've already seen evidences of their presence--during our flight from the Lartroxian coast, and later in Prisarte. What I find astonishing is that EfreI claims the Scylredi still have functional seacraft after untold millennia. The prehuman races created strange machines and weapons through their knowledge of alien technology, but I haven't seen a functional relic of Elder Earth in... Well, in a long time."

Arbas, who in his university days had come across only a few vague allusions to the races of Elder Earth--an age now lost in the veils of myth--declined to press Kane for details. "I see crumbling piles of basalt that EfreI claims were once Scylredi fortresses," he commented. "How can anything mechanical outlast columns of basalt?"

"My thought as well," Kane mused. "If the seacraft were built at the close of the age, as was Dan-Legeh, and maintained carefully over the eons--who can say what is possible or impossible when we speak of the science of Elder Earth? We know far more of our own black sorceries than of prehuman science."

Kane frowned and went on. "There is another possibility. I had wondered why EfreI sought me out to lead her rebellion, and why she waited so long to tell me of her secret alliance."

Imel, who had been listening in gloomy silence, broke in: "Presumably for a number of good reasons. First, EfreI needs a human navy and invasion force. Second, she needed an immediate defense against Maril's retaliation once the Emperor learned of the plot--as she knew he must. Third, she needed a smashing initial victory to swing support to her cause. Finally, the Scylredi demanded some convincing show of strength on EfreI's part, before they chose to interfere in human wars.

"Good," Kane grinned. "Exactly as EfreI has told me--along with the fact that time was needed for the Scylredi to devise a means by which they and their creatures could distinguish our vessels from the Imperial fleet. It all fits."

"Then what's bothering you?" Imel wanted to know. "Suppose these aren't relics from prehuman earth that the Scylredi intend to use," Kane said. "Suppose these are new seacraft that the Scylredi have been constructing to aid EfreI--and that they weren't ready until just now."

Arbas glanced quickly at Kane's brooding face. "Go on."

"If that guess is correct," Kane suggested, "then we know that the Scylredi still have some measure of their ancient knowledge and power. And after untold millennia, EfreI has somehow persuaded them to use this power to intervene in human affairs."

He paused, staring across the jet-black sea. "I wonder whether, having called the Scylredi forth, EfreI will find them less willing to return to their lost realm" EfreI's glad shout cut short his speculation.

"They come!"

The trireme's hull seemed to reverberate with a high-pitched humming from far below. Crewmen looked at one another uneasily. Men shouted and pointed out to sea.

The black waters of the Sorn-Ellyn boiled and heaved. And the Ara-Teving no longer floated alone on the sea.

There were four of them, and they rose up out of the water like a school of gigantic black whales, circling about the Ara-Teving. Only no whales had ever existed to match the size of these metallic

leviathans, nor could any creature of the sea swim with their blurring speed.

A cry of astonishment and of fear went up from the crew. Kane felt a soaring thrill--how long had it been since he had seen a marvel to compare with this?

The Scylredi seacraft were perhaps three times the length of Kane's flagship, although not much broader than the trireme's hull at its widest. Their shape was basically that of an elongated teardrop--ovoid toward the bow and tapering to a point at the stern. Arranged like a crown at the pointed stern, a ring of ovoid protrusions emanated a pale-green glow. Steam rose in a trailing vapor from the lambent cluster--each unit perhaps ten feet in length, and constructed either of near-opaque crystal or semi-translucent metal. At regular intervals along the sloping metal hulls were positioned other conical or ovoid protuberances--these black and apparently lifeless. Otherwise, the Scylredi submarines were featureless.

For a moment the four metallic leviathans hovered upon the surface. Although the crew had been warned what to expect, the appearance of these alien seacraft left every man of them shaken and afraid. Then--as effortlessly as a shark turns for its prey--the submarines accelerated and sped out across the waves, leaving the Ara-Teving shuddering in their backwash. Streaking at a level just below the waves, the submarines tore through the sea--silent, save for the roar of cleft water and the uncanny drone of their engines. Kane could follow their lightning-fast course by the glow of their propulsive units. He roughly estimated their speed to be in excess of sixty knots. From the jet of steam that spewed from their wakes, he guessed that considerable heat was being generated by their engines.

Out across the Sorn-Ellyn, until their pallid green wakes dwindled and vanished. Kane waited. As suddenly as before--the whining hum from the depths, the upheaval of black water--the Scylredi seacraft once again breached the waves about the awe-stricken humans and their puny wooden ship.

"Look now, Kane!" came Efre's shrill cackle.

Kane felt his hair tingle--as in the instant before a lightning storm closes.

Near the bow of one of the alien seacraft, a conical protrusion suddenly glowed into violet incandescence. From this cone of lurid brilliance, a bolt of crackling energy lashed forth to play across the basalt cliffs of the half-mile-distant shoreline. The beam of energy struck the headland--and instantly trees and vegetation flared into roaring flame, rocks splintered and shattered.

In another second all four submarines had opened fire--coruscant bolts of energy lancing forth from the turrets spaced along their black hulls. The flames of hell burst forth from the night, where the fury of their ravaging bolts struck the cliff. The sea rose in gouts of shrieking steam, as red-hot masses of basalt crumbled away in a semi-molten avalanche and crashed into the hissing surf below. The stunted forest was ablaze in one instant, white-hot ash in the next. Across a hundred-foot section of shoreline, it was as if a purple-flamed volcano had suddenly erupted.

As abruptly as it began, the barrage of violent energy ceased. Kane let his breath out and realized he had been holding it throughout. His vision was dazzled from the storm of destroying lightning. Against the coastline, a sullen red wound glowed through the haze of steam and smoke.

The crew were too stunned to feel panic. This was just as well.

"Look now, Kane!" Efre howled. "Look again!"

Kane followed the sorceress's triumphant gesture. The four Scylredi craft had moved out from the Ara-Teving and now formed a square. Kane stared at the square of black water in their midst.

A gasp went up from the crew.

Rising from the waves now, looping black tentacles lashed through the air and slapped spitefully at the submarine hulls. The sea convulsed--and then a titanic writhing mass of tentacles thrashed forth from the sea. For an instant, an immense bloated bulk lurched above the surface. Kane had a fleeting impression of a central body as enormous as the largest whale, of impossible lengths of coiling tentacles whose girth was more than a man might reach around, of a huge gnashing beak that might crush a warship's hull as effortlessly as a parrot cracks an almond, of pallid eyes as wide as an open doorway that stared back at him with malevolent intelligence.

The monstrosity from earth's dawn breached, then plunged beneath the inky waves. Kane knew then that the Oraycha was fully as terrible as legend had portrayed the monster to be. And Kane knew he was glad it was gone. It gave him a chill to think of such a creature lurking in the depths beneath the Ara-Teving. He wondered whether the Scylredi could keep such a beast under control...

In another moment the Scylredi submarines had vanished as well. The Ara-Teving drifted alone on the sea once more--with a panicstricken crew and only a dying red glow from the smouldering shoreline to prove all had not been an insane nightmare.

Efrel threw back her head in laughter. The ermine hood fell back, and Kane looked upon the face of nightmare, howling at a pallid moon.

"Get the men moving!" Kane snapped to Imel. "Let's get out of these waters before the shock wears off."

"What do you think now, Kane?" Efrel exulted. "Did I lie? You asked to be shown, and did I not show you? Do you still fear Netisten Maril and his fleet? Do you still doubt that Efrel commands powers beyond the frightened dreams of mankind?"

"But do you command this power?" Kane wondered aloud.

XXIII

Night in M'Cori's Chamber

Light was dim in M'Cori's bedchamber. The faint candle glow fell softly on the two figures who lay together on her bed, where M'Cori lovingly caressed Lages's hard-muscled back. He lay there quietly, resting for the moment and enjoying the soothing movements of her hands. Lages gave a contented sigh. "Indolent brute!" M'Cori exclaimed, and teasingly slapped him across his buttocks. He grabbed her roughly and pulled the soft, giggling girl against him. The fastenings of her gown had been loosened earlier in their embraces, and as they kissed, Lages drew it down from her shoulders. She made a low sound in her throat and snuggled against his bare chest. After a moment, she giggled and playfully pushed him away. "What liberties do you presume, cad!" she cried, mimicking a role from a romantic drama. "It seems you take a lady's favors too lightly. Would you ruin me?"

Jumping into the act, Lages struck an affected pose-somewhat unsteadily after the wine they had enjoyed-and declaimed: "Ah, fair lady! Spurn not my advances! It reflects but the undying ardor of a poor soldier about to face death in battle!"

M'Cori gasped and fell back upon the pillows. Her face was pale as she dug her fist against her mouth and bit down on the knuckles to hold back the tears.

Lages cursed himself for his oafishness. Damn it! Always saying the wrong thing! She was trying so hard to forget--to find lighthearted refuge from the tension of the gathering conflict--and he had to remind her. The past months had been hard for her, he knew. For all her infectious gaiety, she was at heart fragile as a child. At times Lages feared he would break her with his coarse hands and rough manner.

He touched one naked shoulder and turned her to him. Her sea-green eyes were filled with tears again, but she looked at him and uttered no cry. "You'll never come back," she said softly. "I know it."

Lages laughed and shook her gently. "M'Cori, M'Cori! This is so silly! You said the same thing the last time, remember? And this time there will be much less risk. We know what Kane's tactics are, and we know how to face them. Why, we've even fitted some of our warships with catapults like his. And we'll have, the rebels overwhelmingly outnumbered.

"I won't even be in command," he added, not without considerable chagrin. "Your father is commanding this fleet himself." He noted with satisfaction that M'Cori felt no such concern for her father. Maril had never warmed toward his daughter, for all his fond words.

Her hair was in disorder, and coils of blond tresses had fallen across her breasts. Lages lifted back each strand with a cautious finger. The pain was going from her eyes now. There was hidden strength beneath her delicate appearance.

"Remember your prophecy, M'Cori," he prompted, feeling the pulse of her heart upon his fingertips. "You aren't going to give up on that, after you've kept faith this long, are you?"

M'Cori's face was dreamy. "So long ago," she mused. "I wonder if that woman really was a priestess of Lato." Color had returned to her face now. Her lips were half-parted.

He looked down at her pale beauty reflected in the candlelight. "When we are man and wife, you'll have to grow accustomed to my absences whenever the Empire is threatened."

She looked up at him in resignation. "Let's live for now," she whispered, and reached for him.

XXIV

Night in Efre's Chamber

The giant oil lamps blazed brightly in an effort to dispel the inky darkness of the subterranean chamber. Their harsh, glaring light illuminated a scene as ghastly as any the chamber had witnessed in many centuries.

Kane stood beside Efre in the shadows and watched as a nervous guard of trusted soldiers escorted a party of prisoners into the hidden chamber. The prisoners, some sixty men who had been captured during the battle of three months previous, were unbound; but made no move to escape. Instead, they marched with stiff, wooden legs, their faces frozen in masks of absolute hopelessness. Caught in Efre's paralytic spell, they were powerless to control their movements as they marched inexorably to their doom. Like mindless robots, the Imperials were drawn by the witch's mental commands into the chamber. The fear in their eyes grew deeper as they helplessly stepped ever closer to their fate. The cause of their anguish could be found in the black pool of water toward which they were being lured by invisible tethers.

The wide pool was not calm and mirror-like tonight, as it usually was. The water boiled and stirred with swift movement beneath its dark surface, and undulating shadows could be glimpsed from time to time. Sometimes a black shape would lift itself above the water, then resubmerge faster than the eye could form a distinct image. Nightmare lurked within the pool tonight. The very air reeked with deadly horror, and the prisoners sensed their doom.

Efre was speaking. "Netisten Mari1 is going to make his move very soon, from all indications. He has gathered together just about all the support he's going to get, and the feverish preparations he's been making are about to draw to completion. I assume you are prepared to mobilize on a moment's notice."

"Of course," asserted Kane. "You've already seen that any men are at battle-ready, the fleet gathered together and ready to sail. Just make certain your pretty friends over there are ready when I need them."

He reflected upon the all but insurmountable difficulties he had been plagued with in order to fit the Scylredi and their terrifying weapons into a unified attack formation. Aside from the obvious problems of coordination, there had been tremendous problems arising from the necessity for absolute secrecy. These difficulties proved trivial compared to that of handling the reaction among the men, once they learned the nature of their secret allies. Kane had shown and told them as little as possible, and had maintained discipline with an iron hand. No one left the island except on specific orders.

In the weeks since that night when he had visited the Sorn-Ellyn with Efre, there had been countless

meetings with the Scylredi in Efre's hidden chamber. Here, surrounded by the relics of centuries of sorcerous delvings, Kane had watched Efre communicate with the hideous creatures.

Communication was through mental telepathy--although how Efre was able to exchange thoughts with such inhuman monsters remained a mystery to Kane. Kane had cultivated his own psychic abilities far beyond the limits of most men, but he was able to understand nothing that passed between Efre and the Scylredi. If the Scylredi could form a mental contact with a human mind, they chose to do so only with Efre--or else the witch could draw upon incredible psychic powers in her own right. However the sorceress accomplished the feat, Kane had been able to work out the details for the coming battle through her interpretation.

It mattered little to Kane. The prospect of linking minds with a Scylred did not greatly appeal to him. He was far more interested in the secret of Efre's spell of paralysis. She guarded that secret well--as she guarded all her secrets. Kane thought he recognized the basic enchantment and toyed with the thought of attempting a counterspell with one of the prisoners.

Efre broke in on his reverie. "This should be the talismans coming up to us now."

Kane followed her gesture toward the surface of the pool where a stubby, miniature version of the Scylredi seacraft was just breaking the water. The tiny submarine moved closer to the low wall at the edge of the pool. A hatch slip open across its spheroid bow.

Kane spoke sharply, and a line of uneasy soldiers stepped alongside the wall next to the vessel. With shaky hands, they withdrew the heavy containers that waited within the water-filled hold. One man gasped and almost fell in--as a black loop of tentacle lifted a container to him.

"Be careful, you clumsy ass!" barked Kane. "We'll need every one of those talismans."

The bulky containers held dozens of heavy, egg-shaped globes of metal--featureless objects about the size of a man's head. These talismans were the solution to the major problem of coordination, and their production had been essential before the Scylredi could serve effectively as allies. With these devices, it was possible for the Scylredi to distinguish the rebel warships from the Imperial craft. Products of Scylredi science, the metal eggs emitted a constant drone inaudible to human ears, but which the Scylredi--and their giant servants, the Oraycha--could hear and understand. Each ship in the rebel fleet must carry one of those talismans against its keel--or risk destruction by Efre's inhuman allies when the fighting became close.

Unloaded, the submarine departed. An aura of awful expectancy settled over the chamber. Imel, in charge of the work crew, gladly led the line of porters from the chamber. Arbas stood with his arms folded across his thick chest, waiting to see if Kane would leave.

"One final thing, Kane," reminded Efre, watching the pool's surface intently. "Remember that neither Netisten Maril nor M'Cori is to be killed or injured in the least. I'd like to have Lages alive, too, but with him it isn't essential. Regardless of the cost, Maril and M'Cori must be delivered to me unharmed. Kill a thousand men if it is necessary, but bring them to me so that they may suffer the full vengeance that I promised to wreak upon the house of Netisten! I have elaborate plans regarding those two, and I will not be thwarted in this. See that it is understood by all your men."

"Certainly!" Kane assured her--as if hearing this for the first time. In her insane obsession with vengeance, Efre had impressed this command upon him a hundred times. "Just you see that your ugly friends leave Maril's flagship to me."

Efrel nodded. "They understand. One conspicuous ship they can single out and avoid."

Turning from him, she raised her hand in a beckoning gesture. In agonized terror, the Imperial prisoners jerked forward--puppets dancing on invisible strings. Their muscles twitched with desperate effort, but they could not break free of the spell. Cringing strides carried them closer to the pool, then to the very edge. And over.

Instantly the water came alive--as hordes of the waiting Scylredi rose to seize the struggling captives. Released at the final moment from the spell, their doomed screams echoed throughout the cavernous chamber.

Kane watched in fascination as the tormented victims were dragged beneath the surface in a snare of slimy black tentacles--to be sported with, torn apart, sucked bloodless by these creatures from the lost past.

Scarlet froth lapped along the pool's edge as the last tortured face sank into the bottomless well. Alorri-Zrokros had not lied in regard to the Scylredi's feeding habits.

XXV

Battle for Empire

The sea wind blowing through his red hair, Kane stood at the bow of the Ara-Teving and watched through his telescope as the Imperial fleet crawled across the blue horizon. The sea was dark with ships--warships of all descriptions, flying the red banner of Thovnos, the blue banner of Raconos, the green-and-black dag of Fisitia... Kane gave up trying to count. Warships were here from every quarter of the Empire, rallying to their Emperor to meet the threat of Efrel's insurrection.

The Imperial armada must outnumber his own navy about four to one, Kane decided. Maril was confident in his numbers, and for this reason the Emperor had elected to move first and crush the rebel navy in one decisive encounter. Kane had predicted such a move--and as he regarded his own fleet, he considered Maril's strategy justified.

A disparate formation of outmoded, overhauled and refitted vessels, with only a scattering of first-class warships. Response to Efrel's rebellion had been good--but almost entirely from those minor powers who stood to gain the most from this venture. Withal, Efrel had won a number of the more powerful lords

over to her cause, and their warcraft along with those of Pellin formed the backbone of Kane's fleet. Altogether Kane had nearly a hundred vessels under his command--a powerful navy, but pitifully outnumbered and outclassed by the Imperial armada. They would be slaughtered, if the Scylredi failed to come through.

On the deck of his own flagship, Netisten Maril felt no misgivings as the rebel fleet came into view. "By Horment!" he laughed to his captain. "That pox-eaten witch put together a bigger navy than I'd thought she could. I didn't know there were that many derelicts afloat on the entire Western Sea! A damn lot of good it will do her. Were going to roll over these damned rebels like a tidal wave on a mud flat."

He grinned as an aide handed him his crested helmet. "By nightfall we should be in Prisarte, watching the city burn. I'm going to teach them a lesson here that will quell any thoughts of rebellion for the next century. Pellin has been poisoning the body of the Empire like a rotting cancer for too long. Today I'm going to excise and then cauterize this stinking abscess once and for all. And as for Efrell and her so-called deathless general..."

A shout of alarm roared across the vanguard of the Imperial formation. Maril cut short his gloating to see the cause. Stunned, the Emperor pointed and demanded incredulously, "What in all the seven hells of Lord Tloluvín is that?"

From out of the sea between the two opposing armadas, the four submarine warcraft of the Scylredi breached like a pack of colossal killer whales. Soundless, save for the uncanny ultrasonic whine of their engines, the alien submarines bore down on the Imperial fleet.

Whatever the strange craft might be, their hostile intent was obvious. Maril shouted for his petraries to open fire.

From across the gigantic armada, deck-mounted catapults--smaller than those Kane had used, and more conventionally armed--lashed forth their deadly missiles. A storm of rocks and pitch-soaked fireballs arched across the sea and fell among the Scylredi seacraft. Flame splashed harmlessly across the metallic hulls; rocks struck the impervious leviathans with resounding crashes and glanced aside.

The petraries had scarcely fired a first volley when the Scylredi craft attacked. Crackling bolts of violet energy lanced from their conical turrets. Across the Imperial front, warships suddenly exploded in a hissing roar of flame.

It was as if the Imperial fleet had been caught up in some unthinkable lightning storm on the blazing seas of hell. Ravening bolts of energy devastated the vanguard of the armada, wreaking havoc throughout the proud fleet. Doomed soldiers screamed in horror as they saw their comrades and sister ships blasted into a charred mass--waited for the next destroying bolt to send them to hell. Here was terror that no human weapon could counter, no defense confront. In desperation the catapult crews kept up their ineffectual fire--only to be answered with a continuous barrage of coruscant death from the Scylredi warcraft.

"Keep firing!" yelled Maril, trying to maintain order in the burning chaos wrought by the Scylredi. "Ram them! Whip the oarsmen to full speed!"

Somehow his orders were relayed. Across the deadly waters, his captains desperately sought to close with the Scylredi submarines.

Again and again the violet beams lashed out to destroy. Ships by the score exploded into flaming oblivion. Like a burning, broken thing, the Imperial armada advanced resolutely against the Scylredi craft.

Charred debris clotted the steaming waves. The ocean seemed to boil from the heat. Reeking billows of smoke filled the air, almost obscuring the stench of ozone.

Then Maril felt the deck lift under his feet, as a lance of destroying energy struck the Imperial flagship. Where the bolt fell, the stern of the warship exploded into a pillar of flame--as the intense heat seared timber and flesh in a wash of incandescent flame. A gaping hole was blasted through the hull. Steam shrieked through ruptured planks as the sea gushed into the blazing wound. The warship tilted sharply on its keel.

"Abandon ship" Maril shouted needlessly.

Panic swept the flagship. Men jumped from the flaming hell of the deck into a wreckage-strewn sea. Most were pulled down instantly by the weight of their weapons and mail.

Maril quickly flung off helmet, cuirass, and greaves. He gained the rail, even as the flagship began its final roll, and dived into the water. Cutting the littered surface with clean, powerful strokes, he swam in the direction of the nearest ship. A drowning marine clutched at his leg, dragging him down. The Emperor broke free with a curse and a kick to the wretch's face.

"Here, Uncle!" The cry was that of Lages, whose warship had been alongside Maril's flagship. Swimming through the chaos of charred wreckage and drowning men, Maril reached the other ship. A rope was hurled down to him, which Maril quickly seized. Dodging the oars, he pulled himself aboard. "Lages!" he cried, and grasped his nephew's hand. "No longer do I regret sparing your life! Someone bring me a sword! I won't let another good blade go to the bottom before it's well oiled with stinking rebel blood!"

Lages smiled grimly and cursed. "What hellish weapon is this that Kane has brought against us? The men are being slaughtered, our ships blown out of the water--and we have yet to strike a blow."

"I don't know what it is," shouted Maril. "But I see Efrell's hand in this. And if we can't destroy the sorceress's demon ships, all we can do is get close to Kane's fleet--where they can't fire on us for fear of hitting the rebel ships. Full speed, forward! If stones and fireballs bounce off their armored flanks, we'll see how they take to being rammed!"

The Imperial armada surged through the water, through sheer force of numbers bearing down on the Scylredi craft. Slowly, taking awful casualties, they closed with the submarines. The Scylredi warcraft hovered motionlessly upon the surface--firing into the onrushing fleet as fast as their weapons could be charged.

The first line of warships came abreast of the alien seacraft. One trireme attempted to ram and smashed full into midships of one of the submarines. The trireme's bow crumpled under the impact, doing no damage to the metallic hull other than to knock the submarine backward in the water. In another instant, the warship and the poor fools aboard were consumed in a ripping blast of flame.

But during the uproar, a second trireme rammed at full speed into the stern of another Scylredi submarine, tearing into one of the ovoid projections there. The force of the suicidal collision drove the bronze-capped ram through the glowing ovoid--buried its sharp beak deep within the submarine's droning engines.

Almost on impact, the Scylredi craft exploded into an incandescent ball of searing white flame. A blinding light--brighter than the sun--engulfed both vessels. With a fantastic concussion, trireme and alien

warcraft were annihilated in one awesome blast. Roaring steam spewed in great, scalding clouds into the sky. Bits of cinder and fused metal ripped the sea apart. Ships closest to the blast burst into flame from the heat.

And with the explosion, the remaining three submarine craft dived beneath the surface and disappeared. Either they feared to join their sister ship in death--now that a point of weakness had been found--or they chose to let others continue the battle.

With this deadly obstruction gone, the Imperial fleet surged forward to meet Kane's forces. The soldiers cheered at the destruction of one alien warship and now were in a frenzy to do battle with a tangible, human foe. But Maril was painfully conscious that well over half his fleet had gone to a fiery death beneath the deadly weapons of Efre's demonic allies.

Only a few hundred yards separated the two fleets. Already the air was filled with missiles and arrows, and the battle cries made a roar like angry surf. Then new terror struck--a weapon fully as dreadful and as unexpected as the attack of the Scylredi warcraft--and war cries shuddered into a tocsin of horror.

A slimy black tentacle--thicker than a man's body--suddenly lashed through the waves and wrapped itself around one of the lead warships. Even as the Imperials froze in disbelief, a flurry of tentacles snaked out of the water to seize the doomed ship. Soldiers screamed in horror as a nightmare from the ocean's pits climbed to the surface behind its tentacle--a bloated mountain of rubbery flesh, two dead-white eyes glaring at the hated sunlight. One of the sea's most fearsome legends had come to life.

The Oraycha tightened its grip on the warship. Timbers cracked and splintered in its crushing embrace. Its monstrous, yellowed beak gaped wide as a castle doorway, then snapped together, smashing through the ship's stout hull. Shrieking, flinging themselves into the churning sea, the helpless soldiers were pulled down to hell with their crumpled ship.

More tentacles were breaking water now. More of these monstrosities of primordial evolution arose from the ocean depths to attack the Imperial fleet. With appalling ease, the gigantic Oraycha crushed ship after ship. An uncanny intelligence seemed to direct the monsters' methodical attack.

Shaking off the numbing grip of terror that the sight of such abominations had aroused, the Imperial forces pressed forward to meet this new threat. Arrows were less than pinpricks to the monsters, and sword blows had no more effect than against a tree trunk. Attempts to ram proved futile, as the Oraycha moved too quickly. Those foolhardy enough to attempt to ram one discovered that the creatures would dive beneath them and seize their warship from below in a fatal grasp.

The soldiers fought valiantly against the sea monsters. One reckless captain hurled a spear deep into the eye of an Oraycha as it rose to attack his ship. Those near the scene felt, rather than heard, a soul-searing hiss of agony as black blood geysered from the wound. A gigantic tentacle spasmed upward, then fell to smash the captain into his deck. With a convulsive movement, the enraged creature crushed the warship into kindling.

Emitting great gouts of black ink, the wounded Oraycha attacked one ship after another, tearing at them in a murderous frenzy. Then, as it wrapped itself around one vessel, a trireme seized the chance to bore in from behind and bury its bronze ram into the creature's head. Mortally wounded, the Oraycha lashed about in one last orgy of destruction--before sinking to the bottom in a coiling, writhing mass.

On another stricken ship, the soldiers cast flaming pitch upon the monster that ensnared them. As the flames burned into its slimy flesh, the Oraycha released the warship and plunged beneath the sea. Leaking

badly from sprung timbers, the ship was quickly engulfed in flame. Her men scrambled off into a sea whipped to froth by the monster's agony. They might as well have stayed on the burning decks.

Somehow, through all this turmoil and chaos, the two fleets came together. Shouting their war cries, the Imperial soldiers leaped upon the rebels--carrying them back in the first rush of their charge. Ship smashed against ship, and waves of vicious hand-to-hand combat washed over the decks as the opposing forces clashed. The battle exploded into maddened carnage--with each warship, each man, fighting for life.

Kane saw with satisfaction that the Oraycha had further depleted the Imperial armada. Now their numbers were nearly even--and if his disreputable-looking navy could just fight together, he could wrest a victory out of this battle yet.

An Imperial trireme bore down on him. With experience of countless battles, Kane swung the Ara-Teving aside and struck the other ship a glancing blow with the bronze ram. With a moan of protesting timbers, the two ships grappled. Throwing down the shield he had held against arrows, Kane drew his two swords and rushed to meet the Imperial marines. Cutlass and broadsword flashed like lethal silver through the air; Leaden impact flowed from steel to muscle, and Kane howled at the first shock of combat. The twin blades swung back again, spraying a line of scarlet behind them. Kane laughed wildly as an avalanche of shining steel and snarling fazes swept to overwhelm him. With powerful left-handed blows, he cut down all who rose to meet his challenge.

The sand-strewn deck lurched beneath his feet, and only Kane's lightning-quick reflexes saved him from falling onto his opponent's thrusting swordpoint. A second Imperial trireme had struck the Ara-Teving, and now her soldiers poured over in an all-out effort to take the rebel flagship.

Shouting orders deliberately, Kane directed his men to meet the near menace. His role of commander was a dangerous incumbrance in this close fighting, he realized--even as a group of marines used the distraction to try to slay the rebel leader. Surrounded by vengeful warriors, Kane found himself hard pressed. Laying about him with deadly precision, Kane chopped off a hand of one assailant, laid open an exposed belly of another. He unerringly struck wherever a target presented itself--taking a dreadful toll of his attackers. Only a man of Kane's fantastic prowess could have parried the vortex of steel that sought for him--and many a rash fool died under his flashing blades.

Not all blows could be wholly parried, and deflected blades struck painfully against his mailed body. His hauberk was snagged and bloody, thin gashes bled down face and forearms, and an unseen archer almost skewered his throat with an arrow. It seemed inescapable that some assailant must soon slip beneath Kane's guard and deal him a major wound. Once crippled, Kane knew he would instantly be dragged down, cut to pieces by the jackals. Heedless of his danger, Kane taunted and jeered at his frantic assailants. Covered with blood that matched his red hair, Kane fought on viciously--exulting each time his sword struck home.

Then the Imperial marines began to fall back, leaving a mound of bodies about Kane. Cutting his way across the blood-soaked sand of the decks was Arbas. For the first time Kane realized that Arbas had grappled his warship into the melee, had thrown his men against the overwhelming Imperial force. His entrance had been well timed, and numbers now swung to more favorable odds for the rebels.

"Hey, assassin!" greeted Kane. "How's business today?" Arbas's appearance gave him respite to waste breath on bravado. Kane rested his aching muscles and grinned at his friend.

"There's death enough that the market's flooded!" complained Arbas. He paused to hurl a fallen dagger

through the throat of a soldier on the other side of the deck.

"There's a damn fine throw," the burly assassin applauded. "But finesse is wasted in this melee. Kane, I'm afraid my office as captain will be short-lived. My ship took a ram earlier, and she's leaking badly. In fact, docking her to this mess was the only course left to me, short of swimming."

"Then we'll combine what's left of our crews on the Ara-Teving," Kane declared.

Arbas nodded, then yelled, "Hey, watch that son of a bitch at the bow--up there by the jibsail!"

Kane leaped back as an arrow struck at his feet. Savagely, Kane tore a fallen spear out of the decking and hurled it at the hidden archer. Bow and quiver fell to the deck as the spear ripped through the jibsail. The sniper hung writhing across the bowsprit, like an impaled figurehead.

Kane grunted in satisfaction. "Let's hit them hard, Arbas! Clear our decks, and cut loose."

Arbas glanced at the sea, then cursed. "Damn! This is going to be crowded in a minute! I-Iere comes more company, and those marines are going to be swarming over us like stink on shit!"

Two more Imperial warships, a trireme and a bireme, were converging on the embattled Ara-Teving. Kane looked at the fighting around him, estimated his strength, and realized that his situation would be serious, if not hopeless, when these new warships locked into the melee.

But then the trireme suddenly stopped in her rush. A maze of black tentacles lashed from the depths to ensnare the warship. While her sister ship watched helplessly, the trireme was crushed in the grip of the colossal sea creature. Men spilled into the sea and wallowed about, striving piteously to reach their comrades on board the bireme. Hundred-foot tentacles stirred the sea about the struggling wretches, killing with a zeal that only intelligence could have lusted for.

The Oraycha were hunting beneath the battle-locked fleets now. In response to the ultrasonic impulses of the talismans, they were continuing to single out and destroy the Imperial warships.

Kane had no time to watch further. There was hot, deadly fighting before the reinforcements from the bireme together with the marines from the initial fray could be cleared from the decks. Despite Arbas's men, it was a smaller crew that finally disentangled the Ara-Teving from the floating battlefield and moved on to another foe. Arbas shook his head philosophically as he watched his own abandoned vessel tilt awash with the waves.

Aboard the new Imperial flagship, as all across the battle formation, fighting was similarly hard and without quarter. Twice Lager and Maril had rammed and destroyed rebel warships, and twice they had beaten off attacks against their own ship. Their luck could not continue. They were caught between two rebel warships at once as a glancing blow of one ram tore a great wound below their flagship's waterline.

Lages fought silently beside his uncle on the pitching deck, marveling at Maril's endurance and skill. The choleric emperor had not held his throne through the strength and ability of other men--and he was still the formidable warrior the court poets exalted him to be. But it was evident that their soldiers were slowly falling back before the rebel advance, and Lages realized that soon their ship would be taken. They well knew what capture meant for them, so the two fought recklessly--planning to die with their swords dripping in enemy blood rather than surrender to Efre's mercy.

Then help came from a most unexpected quarter. One of the rebel warships was suddenly seized in the

death-dealing grip of an Oraycha. The creature's inhuman senses had been confused by the proximity of the grappled warships and had attacked the wrong vessel. As the one ship disappeared into broken wreckage, the Imperial marines took new spirit.

"On to the other warship! We're not through with these rebels yet!" Maril shouted, and swung his blade with new zeal. "Kill the gutter-scum! They can't stand against us on even terms!"

With desperate fury, the Imperials jumped from their rapidly settling decks onto the rebel warship. The struggle dragged bloodily on across the other ship, until slowly the rebels were beaten down. There was neither quarter nor mercy--on the decks or in the sea. At last only an exhausted, tattered band of the Imperials stood on the decks of the rebel bireme.

Taking over the ship for his own, Maril ordered his crew to pick up survivors from the sea in an effort to rebuild their strength before moving on to another fight. Grimly he reflected that this was his third flagship of the day.

So the battle raged everywhere, and victory hung in the balance as the hours wore on. At first the advantage had been with the Imperial armada. But as the battle formation closed into a chaotic melee, their superior warships could not be used to best advantage. It was not an ordered battle they fought now, but a maelstrom of brawling violence. Strategy had long been lost in the chaos. Through it all, the relentless attacks of the Oraycha were slowly cutting down the advantage the Imperials had enjoyed in numbers.

It was a grisly, merciless struggle to the death. On both sides, fighting was vicious and desperate--for both sides knew the price of defeat. But the Scylredi's devastating attack and the crushing embraces of the Oraycha had taken a hideous toll, and now Kane's generalship began to assert itself. The scales of battle shifted, and gradually Kane's forces gained the upper hand.

Nonetheless, the battle was far from won--as the violence increased inversely with the falling numbers of the combatants. It was a dirty, personal straggle of man against man, ship against ship--with only one fate for the vanquished.

Imel arrived too late to save his close friend, Lord Gall of Tresli, who fell at last on the decks of his warship, surrounded by a moraine of Imperial dead. Thirsting for vengeance, Imel saw to it that no Imperial soldier left the ship alive. The renegade seemed obsessed with the lust to destroy all those who called him traitor. As the day dragged to a gory close, his gleaming battle gear was sodden with the blood of his countrymen--and the foppish youth was a grim and haggard stranger to his men.

Elsewhere, Lord Bremnor of the backwater island of Olan--an indifferent swordsman himself--killed the famed warrior, Gostel of Parwi, by an amazingly lucky thrust. Lord Bremnor had scarce time to enjoy his new renown, for he was slain by a hidden archer while leading his soldiers onto an Imperial warship.

In another quarter of the battle, a victorious rebel crew had but a moment to celebrate their triumph over the Imperial trireme they had just taken when an Oraycha seized the vessel and smashed it into a broken coffin for victor and vanquished alike.

And so the battle went on...

The Ara-Teving pulled near her sister ship, the Kelkin, where Kane saw a reduced force of the Pellinites striving to meet the onslaught of a fresh wave of Imperial marines. Oxfors Alremas was battling desperately, trying to rally his weary men:

Seizing this chance to rid himself of his enemy, Kane unobtrusively picked up a fallen spear. All eyes were fixed on the Kelkin as the Ara-Teving closed to succor the beleaguered trireme. Waiting for a moment when none of his crew watched him, Kane hurled the spear across the water at Alremas's back. Hard pressed, Alremas chose that moment to stumble to his knees beneath an axe blow to his notched shield. Kane's spear shot past the vacated space and buried its iron blade in the axe-wielder's chest.

"Nice throw, milord!" came the shout from one marine. A murmur of approval passed through the men of both ships as word sped that Kane had saved Alremas through a miraculous spear cast.

Kane swore. His throw had been witnessed, after all, although his intent was favorably misconstrued. Aware that this was too open a place for murder, Kane raised his fist in acknowledgment of the praise, seething inwardly at the thought that the axeman might have killed Alremas. Then they were upon the Imperial warship, and Kane was too busy rescuing his enemy to hatch further schemes.

Looping across the faltering battle, Netisten Maril came to the shocking realization that his forces were being defeated. Of his giant armada of some four hundred warships, only about twenty-five remained afloat--mostly in crippled condition.

The Emperor had almost lost this third flagship--when one of his own warships had seen the Pellinite banners and nearly rammed him. The remaining Imperial warships were being slowly and relentlessly overwhelmed by the rebel navy--still with maybe forty ships afloat, and the constant threat of the Oraycha giving them confidence. Their exact strengths were a little uncertain, because of the frequent exchange of control of an embattled warship. Maril had been told of one trireme that had changed hands three times. This morning the thought had been inconceivable; as the shadows lengthened it was inescapable. The entire might of the Thovnosian Empire had been brutally annihilated by the forces of an insane sorceress. Efre had conquered. Total defeat was inevitable if he remained on the field.

"I'm going to order a retreat," he bleakly informed Lages. "We'll at least try to save something to use to defend Thovnos."

His nephew grimly worked to stanch the flow of blood from his side, where a dagger point had forced the joint of his cuirass. Lages said nothing. There were no words to say.

Giving the signal to retreat, Maril headed for Thovnosten with his captured warship. The surviving Imperial warships followed suit--those that were able to escape the melee. What looked at first to be pursuit, turned out instead to be a number of other captured rebel warships, whose new masters little realized that they may have owed their lives to the droning impulses of the Scylredi talismans fixed to their prizes' keels. Altogether, fourteen ships left the wreckage of the battle and made for Thovnosten.

"They're in flight!" shouted Arbas. "We've beaten them at last! Kane, you've defeated the largest armada ever assembled in this part of the world--maybe even the damn biggest fleet in history!"

"It soothes some old wounds," said Kane, thinking of a similar battle with an opposite ending, two centuries before. His eyes grew clouded in revery.

"Shall we chase them?" Arbas wanted to know. "Hell, if Efre's sea demons hadn't turned tail, we could've sent them out to blast every mother's son of them. But we might still overtake them before dark."

"No. We'll let them run," Kane decided. He was limping somewhat, and his right arm was hard to use

from a deep gash that continued to seep through the crude bandage. Even Kane's fantastic strength had been pushed past limit in the grueling, day-long battle.

"We'll hold our position and consolidate our victory," he concluded. "There's plenty of salvageable material in the water that we're going to need--and the men need a chance to lick their wounds and celebrate. We'll mop up here and head for Prisarte.

"Efrel won't like it that we've let her enemy escape, but we'll finish Maril later. Right now I could see a bath, a drink, and some soft kisses to draw out the pain of battle. We just may burn down Prisarte tonight by ourselves."

He scowled wearily at the dwindling warships. Evidently the Oraycha had tired of their sport and were feeding by now. The sea was an overflowing storm sewer of death. The water was filled with the wreckage of hundreds of ships, the bodies of thousands of men. And Kane could see other dark shapes feasting among the debris that were not Oraycha.

XXVI

A Victory Toast

The riot and jubilation that claimed Prisarte did not penetrate into the northern wing of Dan-Legeh. In the night beyond the black citadel, the city resounded with the rebels' victory celebration. Taverns and bordellos overflowed into the streets and alleys, where mobs of revellers feasted and drank and caroused without care or thought for the next battle.

Oxfors Alremas stood stiffly in Efrel's private chambers, sipping pale wine from a crystal chalice. The Pellinite lord was impeccably groomed, resplendent in brocaded houppelande and silken hose. He might have just emerged from a court ball, rather than from a grueling and bloody day of battle.

"The joy of my victory is made tasteless by the escape of Netisten Maril," Efrel murmured.

Alremas wiped his lips with a perfumed handkerchief. "I should consider it ill grace to criticize a man who has saved my life," he said urbanely. "However, I do feel that Kane should have given pursuit. There was sufficient time to overtake the fugitive survivors before darkness. I imagine that Kane had had enough fighting for the day. Certainly, he lost no time upon landing to go out drinking and brawling with the common soldiers."

"The gods of darkness have granted me victory," Efrele mused. "In a matter of days Thovnosten will have fallen to me. Then let Netisten Maril be dragged from the smoking ruins of his lost majesty, be brought to me in chains and disgrace. My vengeance shall have the more savor for the anticipation of a few more days."

"I suggest that you remind Kane that the Emperor is to be taken alive," Alremas told her. "It is churlish to disparage one's superior officer, but I must say that Kane showed little concern for capturing Maril. Looking back upon the conduct of his men during the battle, it's a wonder that Maril wasn't killed in the melee."

Efrele's one eye glared at him balefully. "That must not happen," she hissed. "Netisten Maril must be brought to me alive--at any cost!"

"I shall do all in my power to see that your wishes are obeyed," promised Alremas.

"And M'Cori," Efrele breathed. "M'Cori must also be brought to me--untouched and unharmed! Do you understand?"

"I understand, my Queen," Alremas assured her. "And I shall continue to remind Kane of your commands."

He set aside his chalice and knelt beside her couch. "Efrele, let me command the invasion fleet. Kane has served his purpose. The man is dangerous. You think you use him--but I fear that Kane uses you instead."

"Enough!" snarled Efrele. "I use men as I please--and discard them when it pleases me! See that my wishes are obeyed, Oxfors Alremas--and beware that your jealousy of Kane does not detract from your usefulness to me! You may go now."

Alremas stood up, saluted stiffly, and withdrew from Efrele's presence. Hatred smoldered in his eyes.

Efrele finished her wine and felt the rush of anger subside. Reclining upon her couch, she stared at the painting on the wall.

Efrele of another life stared down at her.

Efrele loosened her fur pelisse and let its folds fall away from her naked flesh. Her unblemished hands trailed across the hideous expanses of twisted scar and torn flesh. She gazed entranced upon the girl of naked beauty in the painting, caressed her mutilated body. Were these maimed legs once those ivory thighs of the painting? Were these tattered breasts those same rouge-crowned hillocks? Was this mass of scar and broken rib once that slim white belly? Was this face...

There were tears in that eye that could yet distill tears.

"Soon," Efrele crooned to herself. "Soon..."

XXVII

Attack On Thovnosten

A week after the defeat of the Imperial armada, Kane watched the coastline of Thovnos climb out of the sea. This day he commanded a fleet of some seventy-five ships of all descriptions, crowded to the rails with fighting men for the invasion of Thovnosten. This was to be the final assault, for Kane estimated Maril's strength to be too decimated to withstand a full-scale attack. The only difficulty would be in penetrating the city's defenses, and Kane trusted to the Scylredi to accomplish this task.

Whatever their reaction over the loss of one of their irreplaceable submarine craft, Efre had succeeded in maintaining their support in the rebellion. But, so the sorceress warned Kane, the energy that powered their engines and terrible weapons was almost exhausted. Unable to replenish this energy source, the Scylredi had made only sparing use of their warcraft for centuries. Efre had persuaded them to consume some final reservoirs of this precious energy, but the Scylredi insisted that their annihilating rays be utilized only where it was absolutely essential.

As he had expected, Kane encountered no resistance on the passage to Thovnos. Maril had realized it would only be a foolish waste of strength to oppose Kane's fleet with the remnants of his own force. The Emperor had gathered together everything at his command to mount a desperate defense of Thovnosten--knowing that he must preserve his capital from Efre's power at all costs. The sea was barren of Imperial warships now. Without incident, the rebel fleet took up position outside the harbor of Thovnosten.

Thovnosten's harbor was too wide to be blocked, but through the glass Kane could see that at strategic places wrecks had been sunk and sharp poles driven into the bottom, in an effort to stop the invaders. They would have to proceed carefully if the Scylredi did not remove all obstructions, and that would expose the ships to the defenders' fire. And this was only the outer perimeter of the harbor defenses. The surviving warships of the great battle were armed and ready to repel the invaders within the harbor. Kane noted dozens of fishing boats and other nondescript hulls drawn up before the Imperial fleet. Fireboats and other pleasantries, Kane decided.

The walls of the city were lined with defenders. Every able-bodied man in the city must have turned out to hold the walls. Also visible were great numbers of catapults--along with mounds of boulders and vats of flaming oil to be hurled down on the attackers. The city gates were strong and well fortified--work for a massive battering ram, assuming men could endure the constant fire from the walls. Altogether, Thovnosten was well prepared to withstand the rebel assault, and the city's defenders were determined not to yield.

Ordinarily Kane would never have considered taking the stronghold, except by long siege.

But Efre's inhuman allies fought with weapons no human defenses could withstand. Beyond the harbor,

the Scylredi warcraft now surfaced to signal the start of the final assault.

Deadly bolts of violet heat crackled forth from the submarines and sliced into the walls of Thovnosten. Hundreds of screaming defenders died in searing blast after blast as the very stones shattered to cinder under the incandescent heat. Catapults and siege machinery flashed into charred heaps, while kettles of oil exploded into gigantic fireballs. Howling mobs fled in terror. The frightened tales of the battle's survivors had only been halfway believed. Now the horrors of prehuman science rose up from the ocean depths to confront the race that dared to declare itself masters of the earth.

From the city came an answering hail of arrows and missiles of all kinds. The rain of death glanced harmlessly off the metal hulls, or fell among the recklessly advancing warships with more serious effect. But as the lashes of destroying energy raked the walls of the city, the return fire became ragged--and failed. Columns of black, reeking smoke boiled up from the battlements. Screaming figures stumbled from the wall, trailing flame as they plummeted to the smouldering ground below.

Then the Scylredi turned their fire against the city gates. With a thundering concussion, the iron gates were blasted into a flaming gout of molten fragments and fused cinder--leaving gaping holes in the cracked walls. Thovnosten's heart was guarded now only by tumbled heaps of flaming timber and splintered rubble.

Turning from the smouldering walls, the submarines unleashed a salvo of quick bursts of coruscant hellfire into the waiting ships. Fireships exploded amidst the lines of warships. The last of the Imperial navy withered beneath the destroying barrage. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the firing ceased and the warcraft submerged. But in less than ten minutes, their awesome attack had annihilated the defenses of Thovnosten.

"Now! Let's get in there before they pick themselves up!" shouted Kane--and the rebel fleet drove into the harbor.

Several captains were careless, smashing their ships into hidden obstructions--but the great part of the rebel fleet entered the harbor unscathed and rushed to meet what remained of the Imperial navy. Ship crashed into ship as the Imperial forces recklessly attacked the rebels. They knew theirs to be a suicide mission, and they fought like maddened devils to take as many souls as possible with them into the eternal night.

Fishing boats filled with combustible materials were set afire and driven into the ranks of the invaders. In the close quarters, precise maneuvering was impossible--and the blazing fireboats smashed against several warships, showering them with flame. And as the battle dragged on, a scattered but steadily increasing rain of arrows and missiles descended upon the struggling warships. The survivors were quickly returning to the smoking walls.

But the resistance was ineffectual. Defenses geared to the repulsion of a natural enemy had been shattered by an inhuman force. The rebel invasion fleet pressed relentlessly forward, and although a number of ships were lost, the desperate defenders were driven back. Decks swarming with rebel soldiers, the last of the Imperial fleet was overrun--helpless against the irresistible strength of Kane's hordes. The rebel fleet landed, and thousands of soldiers rushed ashore to carry the battle into the city. Following Kane's commands, the rebel forces now split into three sections, each entering the city through a different breach in the walls. This would cut the regrouping defenders off from each other--and make it impossible for the Thovnosians to throw their remaining strength against any single front.

Taking several arrows on his shield, Kane jumped ashore and pushed to the glowing ruin of the main

gate. His men were milling about the smouldering wreckage--momentarily checked as the Thavnosians concentrated their shattered forces to defend the major portal. The soldiers shouted a welcome as he joined them, and confidently they followed him into the hard fighting around the breach in the wall. Like a demon of death, Kane cut through the defenders--smashing them aside with powerful razor-edged strokes. For this heavy fighting Kane chose to carry his short-hafted battle-axe. Swinging the double-bitted weapon with his strong left arm, Kane ripped men apart in crimson eruptions of dismembered limbs, entrails, and gore. Behind the bludgeon of his axe, the cutlass Kane wielded in his right hand flashed like a serpent's fang. Heedless of arrows in the dense melee, Kane discarded his buckler and trusted to his mail to turn the steel that stabbed past his guard.

On through the ranks of the Thovnosians, Kane led his men in an irresistible wedge. The streets and the rubble of the walls were choked with fallen bodies as the Thovnosians fought valiantly to repel the invaders. But they were relentlessly crushed against the smoking ruins and the corpses of their comrades. Sensing victory, the rebels stored over the windrows of dead and began a three-headed invasion of the city itself.

For hours fierce fighting raged, but Thovnosten now was doomed. Her defenses were annihilated, and thousands of the enemy were pouring into her streets. No organized resistance could be thrown against the raiders, and the small pockets of defenders were cut down to a man. Soon the fighting ebbed, to be replaced by waves of looting and rapine.

The rebels ran from house to house--killing all who could not flee, seizing what they wanted, and setting fire to the rest. The smoke-filled streets of the Imperial capital echoed with the shrieks of tortured women, the wails of children, the screams of the injured and dying. It was a dream become reality for the pirates and cutthroats recruited by Kane--as all men returned to their true state of bestiality and reveled in the mad glory of rape and pillage.

Racing through the orgy of rape and unbridled destruction, Kane led a strong force of raiders to the Imperial palace. Here the resistance was still organized, and the fighting was fierce and unyielding. Another band of rebels led by Imel quickly joined them at the beleaguered walls. If the Thovnosian renegade felt any remorse over the sack of his native capital, he failed to show it.

"Where's Alremas?" Kane shouted.

"Working his way around from behind," came Imel's answer. "He should get here in ten or twenty minutes." Kane felt bitterness that his enemy seemed invulnerable in these affairs. "Look, you know your way around here. When we break through, take some men and capture M'Cori. Remember--bring her to me unharmed. I'll handle the resistance until Alremas can bring up his reserve."

Imel nodded and returned to his men. Sending a party under Arbas to mock up mantlets and battering rams from the wreckage, Kane began the assault on the stronghold. The defense from the palace walls was rugged and determined--but rebel archers kept the defenders pinned down effectively, until the improvised battering rang could drive its way through the main gate. With Kane in the lead, the rebels poured through the palace gardens and courts, into the halls themselves. The palace guard fought valiantly, but they were steadily driven back by Kane's superior force.

"Kane!" A haggard figure in armor suddenly loomed before Kane. Netisten Maril had watched his Empire crumble about him--and now after hours of furious fighting in a vain effort to blunt the rebel drive, he had returned to defend his palace. "By Horment, at least I'll have the satisfaction of sending your black soul down to the Seventh Hell!"

"There have been many who have tried!" sneered Kane. "And Lord Tloluvín now watches over them all!"

With a bull-like bellow of rage, Maril rushed upon Kane. The Emperor was a powerful man, and he fought driven by an insane fury. Here at last was the man who had brought about the ruin of his vast Empire. If victory had eluded the Emperor, at least vengeance was within his grasp. Kane gave ground slowly under Maril's violent attack, stopping blow after blow with his sword--smashing at the Emperor's shield with his axe. Recklessly Maril avoided the flashing battle-axe in Kane's left hand and pressed his attack in a storm of steel lightning and thunderous clangour. Berserk strength guided his furious swordplay.

A sudden twist of Maril's longer blade caught Kane in his right arm--gashing painfully through the partially healed wound he carried there. The cutlass clattered from Kane's grasp, and he now faced Maril with one arm useless. A red lust to kill overwhelmed Kane's senses. Ignoring the pain, Kane carefully circled Maril, watching for an opening. His axe wove a glittering pattern as he snarled defiance.

But Maril was too reckless in his eagerness to finish his hated enemy. One slip was all Kane needed. Kane feinted with the heavy axe and recoiled as Maril's blade swept wildly past his head. For an instant the Emperor was overextended with the impetus of his decapitating stroke. With blinding speed, Kane's axe swung out and clove through Maril's cuirass and ribcage. His eye still brimming with hatred, Netisten Maril crumpled to the floor and died in a rush of blood at Kane's feet.

"Well, you've killed him," observed Arbas, who had been watching the duel with great interest. "Efre! I think, will not be amused. And to make things perfect, I see our friend, Alremas, has broken through just in time to witness the Emperor's last stand. I'm sure he won't waste time telling Efre who killed him. Kane, maybe we should take our time about getting back to Pellin."

Kane cursed and examined his badly wounded arm. "Screw her! I'll talk to Efre! I wasn't about to let Maril kill me just to satisfy her whim! I've handed Efre the Imperial throne--and if Imel comes through with M'Cori, she should be happy enough."

Imel, in the meantime, had fought his way to M'Cori's chambers. There the renegade and his men finally cut down the last of those who had been stationed on guard and forced an entrance into her rooms. The rebels fell upon the screaming servant girls, then swaggered into M'Cori's presence.

M'Cori fought down her gnawing terror and rose defiantly to meet the grinning intruders. Thoughts of suicide had raced through her mind, but the idea was too repulsive. While there was life, there was hope--and until she knew that Lages was slain, she refused to relinquish all hope.

Savouring her beauty, Imel cursed Efre for reserving M'Cori for her own uses. The girl would make a nice prize for the sorceress's most valued servant. "Come along quietly, and I promise you won't be harmed," he told his blond captive. He smiled reassuringly. "You're an honored prisoner, after all. We're to escort you to the Empress at Prisarte."

"Nothing is lower than a renegade!" spat M'Cori.

"Better a victorious renegade than a defeated patriot," Imel shrugged. He ordered her bound, then led her back to Kane. There would be less principled girls elsewhere in the plundered city.

Meanwhile in the red chaos of the streets, Lages still carried on a desperate resistance. Separating from his uncle early in the battle to meet the multiple rebel attack, Lages had been bypassed by the main thrust

of the invaders. As a result of this chance, he and a ragged band of Imperial soldiers still roamed the riot-filled streets, cutting down scattered looters. Knowing that the Imperial capital was lost, Lages fought on without thought of escape, intending to die amidst the ashes of his city.

Then a messenger reached him with word of the palace's fall, of the Emperor's death and M'Cori's capture. At this news Lages broke into a suicidal frenzy, howling for his men to follow him in an impossible attempt to rescue M'Cori. But his weary soldiers held him back, convinced him that it would be senseless to throw all their lives away in a hopeless attack against Kane and his army of marauders.

At last Lages realized the hopelessness of the situation. He gave orders to spread the word for all loyalists to join him, then grudgingly retreated with his battle-worn band. Picking up stragglers as they passed, he moved out of the burning city and into the hills of Thovnos, where he could organize guerrilla resistance to the Empire's conquerors.

And thus fell the Thovnosian Empire, in ashes and blood--at the hand of the man who had indirectly been responsible for its creation.

XXVIII

The Hand of Kane

Throughout the city of Prisarte, there was wild celebration among the victorious rebels. The tension of battle broke loose into jubilant hysteria. Captured gold and wine flowed freely, as drunken revelry and raucous gaiety prevailed.

Within the black fortress of Dan-Legeh, the atmosphere was otherwise. Efre was in a towering rage. For an hour she had shrieked and cursed insanely at Kane. His crushing defeat of the Thovnosian Empire meant nothing to her in this state of madness. All the sorceress knew was that Kane had slain her enemy himself. His colossal stupidity had forever destroyed her long-cherished dream of vengeance. For months she had been kept alive through her hatred for the man who had shamed and mutilated her--and now Netisten Maril was beyond even her revenge.

Oxfors Alremas watched smugly as Kane stoically withstood Efre's endless tirade. At times she could only utter a shrill, incoherent shriek of impassioned rage. Never had Alremas seen her in such wrath. He judged with satisfaction that he no longer would have to worry about Kane. With his rival's fall from favor, he should be able to convince Efre that Kane was too dangerous to have around. Then it was just a matter of legal murder.

Kane gave up all efforts to reason with the sorceress. Realizing that she was beyond rationality, he braced himself and waited for her anger to slacken. It took some time, but finally her tirade ceased.

Before she could begin again, Kane rushed to speak: "In every particular but this, I have fulfilled your every command. When before this have you had any reason to criticize me or my methods? And despite what some lying tongues say, I only meant to disarm Maril. The fool refused to surrender--he all but threw himself against my axe. So how am I to blame for his death? Forget this one whim of vengeance. Haven't I delivered the Empire into your hands? I have accomplished everything else I agreed to perform in your service. And remember, you still have M'Cori to work your revenge upon."

A strange light came into Efre's eye. Her attention seemed no longer fixed on Kane, but on some secret thought. "Yes, but another was responsible for her capture," she hissed.

"May I point out a slight dissimilarity between capturing a teenage girl and subduing a seasoned warrior? Anyway, it was all carried out according to any orders."

Kane added shrewdly: "Lages is still on the loose--and with an army of sorts under his command. Until he and his guerrillas are destroyed, you will always have that threat hanging over you. Perhaps you feel that another should deal with Lages."

Efre snarled in frustration, "No, damn you! I still want you to root out the last shreds of Imperial resistance. When you have accomplished this, you may then claim your reward. Now get out of my sight--before I treat you to the fate I had reserved for Maril!"

"Thank you for your benevolence," said Kane dryly--trying to mask his feelings. "I assure you that Lages will straightway be delivered to you for this pleasure."

He hastily left the council room, his face taut with cold anger. Arbas was waiting around outside. "I wasn't sure you'd come out of that with your hide intact!" he began. "You know, you could hear her howls all over this fortress. Damn! I've never heard anyone in such a rage!"

Kane grunted and walked on in silence. "Let's go where we can talk," he finally muttered.

"Any alehouse should do for that. There's too much noise and drunkenness for spying tonight. Anyway," the assassin added reflectively, "it's a good occasion to get drunk, if nothing else."

So they eventually found their way to a bustling tavern, where crowds of battle-weary soldiers mixed drink and women in loud celebration. Picking their way to a relatively deserted corner of the room, they took up mugs of ale and sat down. Arbas eyed the dancing girls calculatingly, but there was real concern beneath his festive air.

"I think you know what I have to say," Kane began in a low voice. "I never intended to leave that madwoman in control of the new Empire. I had hoped to bide my time until the choice moment. Now it looks as though I'm going to have to move faster than I'd planned."

He frowned, remembering Alremas's supercilious smile during his ordeal with Efre. "Anyway, there's no other course left to me. Alremas looked at me like I was an old friend with a fatal disease. This war has depleted Efre's strength as much as the Empire's. I can count on enough men to do the job. The mercenaries from outside the Empire will follow me--as will most of those who were in on this for motives of pure gain. Imel will side with me, I know. Efre can only count on the Pellinites to support her

claim to rule."

The assassin sipped his beer thoughtfully. "You figure you can swing enough support, then? I mean, you'll be up against all of Pellin--and Efre's sorcery."

"I think so. I intend a coup d'état, not a conquest. We'll strike fast and secretly. By the time anyone knows what's going on, it will be too late to do anything. Besides, we've got M'Cori--and unless I'm mistaken, she's going to bring us some more help."

"What do you mean?" Arbas asked, belching and refilling their mugs.

"Lages is holed up somewhere on Thovnos with quite a few men. We can make use of their swords. When I offer him a chance to save M'Cori from Efre, I'm certain the fool will join us. Afterward, something can happen to him."

Kane's eyes looked beyond the room. "I almost had this place in my grasp once before. I don't mean to let it slip away again."

XXIX

The Vengeance of Efre

Far beneath the revelry of the night outside, smoky yellow flames from the great oil lamps gave light to a shadowy scene of bizarre antithesis. In her subterranean chamber, Efre stood gloating over the chained form of M'Cori.

The tableau presented absolute extremes of the feminine soul. M'Cori crouched in chains before her captor. Ingenuous, blond and fair-skinned, face and figure of fragile loveliness--M'Cori was truly a child of light. Before her strutted a cold-hearted girl of spider-like cunning. Efre--black-haired and pale-skinned, uncanny beauty corrupted into hideous mutilation. Efre, a queen of night. A soul that loved the world of daylight was ensnared by a soul of malevolent hatred.

M'Cori moved as far back as the chains anchored to the floor would permit--recoiling in horror from the evil mockery of femininity that leered at her. Efre watched her terrified captive with unutterable delight.

"M'Cori, dear--don't you recognize me?" she taunted. "Have you forgotten Efre? It's true that I was much lovelier at your father's court--but your father saw to that, didn't he? It's a pity Maril died without

once more enjoying the beauty that his malice had moulded. Did you weep for Efre! when she died, M'Cori?"

She tittered at the expression of absolute horror frozen on her captive's face. "But as I remember, you never did care much for Efre!, did you? Efre! was too dark a spirit to meet favor in your dear little thoughts. Well, that's forgiven--all is forgiven--because you're going to make it up to me now."

She stared intently at the fragile beauty of M'Cori. "M'Cori will be spared the fate I had planned for her father. Pretty M'Cori, you shouldn't be frightened of Efre!. No flaying knife shall caress lovely M'Cori's soft skin. Ah, you always were so beautiful a child, weren't you? Some even claimed more beautiful than I was. Beautiful child, let me see more of you!" Savagely, Efre!'s hands clawed out at her captive and tore away the silken shoulders of M'Cori's gown.

M'Cori jerked back from her clutching fingers. "Efre! Why are you doing this to me?" she stammered. "I have never wished you harm! I was promised I would be treated as an honored prisoner. Instead you chain me in your dungeons--threaten me with torture!"

Efre! cackled wildly. "Torture you? No, no--rest assured that I won't harm one hair of your golden body. Oh, no! But as you will learn, pretty one, I have every right to examine all your beauty."

She swayed before her captive, like a serpent before a hypnotized bird. "Do you know what I have planned for you, dear M'Cori? Not torture, I promise you.

"Have you ever studied the arts of the occult sphere? Sweet M'Cori, you're trembling. How careless of me to forget--your bright little world revolves around happier pastimes. M'Cori has always lived in a flower garden world--her life is a game of adventures and childish laughter. So it is not strange that you should show such revulsion toward sorcery.

"For Efre! it was otherwise. I was far younger than you, beautiful child, when first I ripped a virgin's heart from her breast and offered it to a howling demon from the world beyond night. But M'Cori read foolish love poetry, instead of blood-stained grimoires. Withal, we might be sisters for the nearness of our ages--but you frolicked in the sunlight, while Efre! danced in sulfur-lit darkness. Yet I wonder if you could stand here in my place--dreaming the dreams of hatred and vengeance that I know--had it been M'Cori, and not Efre!, that Netisten Maril gave to the bull. My gods spared me to fulfill my curse. Would yours have done the same?

"Still I see only horror in your eyes. Sweet M'Cori only feels compassion for pretty things. When you saved a struggling butterfly from his webbed prison, M'Cori darling, did you ever shed a tear for the spider you thus left to starve? Have you ever thought, dear child, what you might have become had our lives been reversed? Would you feel sympathy for the spider, had you been born a child of night? Had there been dark Pellin blood in your heart, instead of tepid Netisten blood--perhaps lovely M'Cori would have learned to chant spells, rather than to recite sugary poems. Perhaps M'Cori would have abandoned her flower gardens to the conqueror weeds and spent her nights poring over cryptic lines paged on human skin.

"But I was speaking of sorcery. If your childhood had passed like mine, perhaps then M'Cori would know of an ancient spell of transmiration. She might know that through certain magics, the soul can be excised from its earthly body and projected through the cosmos, that through patent sorceries a captive soul may be stolen from its natural breast and imprisoned within another body. She might even know how to perform the difficult spell through which the human soul may be exchanged from one body to another--wrested from its corporeal form and imprisoned within the body of the adept.

"Efrel knows such a spell, pretty one."

Efrel swayed closer to her cringing captive. One hand lifted her chin, the other slipped the torn gown away from M'Cori's shoulders. The girl's face was blank with frightened wonder.

"Now do you understand why your body interests me so? Dear M'Cori, you stare at me so innocently--without comprehension. Must I tell you what your naive mind refuses to accept?"

"Your body will soon be my own."

She laughed with insane pleasure at M'Cori's scream of horror. "Yes! Yes, my lovely one! That is why I've spared you from these instruments of crude torture. No harm shall come to pretty, pretty M'Cori. Because before very long your body will be mine, and your spirit will be trapped in this shattered hull that once was Efrel! Think of the irony of it! Maril's own daughter--imprisoned within the mutilated flesh he had lusted for and then destroyed. And the woman he had doomed to a hideous death--alive and beautiful once again in his own daughter's body."

Numb with fear and shock, M'Cori watched the sorceress fall to the floor in maddened laughter. In a half-faint, she huddled in her chains and watched as in a dream while the cavorting, taunting madwoman hopped about her, tearing away her clothing and greedily pawing over her body. Efrel's scarred face giggled inches from her own. Sharp nails clutched at her bare flesh. Torn lips whispered intolerable demands and promises into her ears.

M'Cori tried to crawl away, but chains fettered her wrists and ankles. She tried to struggle free, but the sorceress's mad strength was too much for her. Her screams were lost in the shadows of the hidden chamber. Her garments were in shreds now. Efrel's hands crawled over her naked flesh. She was pinned beneath the sorceress's writhing body, naked now as well. Tattered lips caressed her face, sucked at her lips, bit her breasts. M'Cori moaned in revulsion as Efrel forced her legs apart and bent her helpless body to serve her lusts.

Sick with loathing, M'Cori writhed helplessly beneath the bestial assault of the raving sorceress. Her soul shriveled with the horror of it--as a wave of evil crushed her to the stones, smothered her sobbing breath. Pain and nausea and shame shook her violated flesh in great paroxysms. She felt herself falling into a deep black well, and somewhere in the nightmare came oblivion.

Sometime later, when M'Cori awoke, she was unable for a moment to orient herself. In her hollow weakness, it seemed for a space that she still lay tossing in the delirium of a fever-dream. Then she saw the dark stones, the chains, the torn clothing, her scratched and bruised flesh--and knew that the nightmare was reality.

Groggily she sat up, praying that the scene of horror might yet dissolve into fragments of dream. The walls did not waver, and the sickness remained. Weird odors filled the air; bluish lights flickered in the darkness. Looking about, M'Cori saw that she now was chained in the center of a great circle.

An evil laugh drew a gasp from her. "Back with me so soon, my darling?" Efrel jeered. "Was it passion that made you faint beneath my tender caresses, pretty child? Touching modesty from one who is not

even a virgin."

She laughed cruelly and bent to examine a large parchment-paged volume. Around her were stacks of other strangely bound works of varying stages of antiquity--along with jars and vials of paints, chinks, incenses, and the dubious powders and elixirs of her black art. From the vast quantities of occult paraphernalia the sorceress had drawn together, it was evident that EfreI was at work on some great necromantic project.

"You look interested," sneered the sorceress. "Well, you should be. After all, this spell will be of no little personal interest to you, won't it? Besides, this is a very intriguing spell--and a most difficult one, as well. I shall need a few days just to get everything in readiness to begin the actual conjuration. But I have prepared well for this triumph, so you won't be inconvenienced too long. A few days are nothing to one who has already suffered a lifetime of agony and shame as this crippled monster your father made me.

"Poor pretty M'Cori, I hope the delay won't tire you. But we shall find ways to amuse one another from time to time, you and I. And if you find yourself bored, just take a last long look at your lovely body. You may find your new one a considerable change."

M'Cori stretched out on the cold stones and sobbed wretchedly.

XXX

An Unexpected Alliance

"I don't know why I don't cut out your black heart!" snarled Lages, by way of greeting.

Kane shrugged. "For the same reason that you agreed to this meeting. Because you want to see M'Cori again--and you know that if you don't act quickly, you won't like what you'll see."

He waited for that barb to sink in. Announcing that he intended to mop up Lages's guerilla force without delay, Kane had sailed for Thovnos almost immediately following his last meeting with EfreI. With him Kane had brought a good-sized force loyal to him--former pirates and brigands, mercenaries, and a few ambitious adventurers like Imel. The Thovnosten renegade Kane left in Prisarte, to gather more men and to stand ready at the Pellin stronghold when he returned. EfreI, Kane learned, had withdrawn into her hidden chamber, with the command that on no account was she to be interrupted. Her action boded ill for M'Cori, but was perfect for Kane's designs. Finding where Lager and his hand were holed up was not too difficult for a man of Kane's resources--although arranging a meeting had been more of a

problem. Desperation and the tempting possibilities of Kane's proposal had caused Lages to take the risk. They had arranged to meet in an isolated region of the great forest that covered much of Thovnos. Here they each brought fifty men along with them--well armed and suspicious of traps. Kane guessed that Lages probably had many more within calling distance--but then, so did he.

"I assume you understand what I'm proposing," Kane prompted.

"Your emissary was clear enough," replied Lages sullenly. "Only tell me why I should trust you? Regardless of the legends they tell of Red Kane, you've done enough to our Empire in the past year to make the name of Kane a curse for centuries to come. I know you have no scruples against luring me out of hiding--then springing a trap and slaughtering us to a man."

"That's true enough," Kane conceded graciously. "You'll have no reason to trust me. Only consider: I found out where you and your band were hidden easily enough. If I really wanted to destroy you, I would simply have brought up the large army at my command, encircled you, and wiped out every last one of you. And by doing so, I wouldn't have had to risk my own neck trying to hold a conference with you.

"And now consider this: Efre has your friend M'Cori--and you can be sure the witch has something most unpleasant in store for her. Efre would probably suspect my treachery, in fact--if she weren't so preoccupied with her captive.

"Oh, I don't think she's done too much to her yet!" Kane interjected, to halt an outburst from Lages.

"She's going to make whatever she does to her last a long time. Probably only mental anguish to start with--nothing that will leave physical scars. I've seen that Efre likes to savour her games. But you can be certain that you'll have to act pretty damn fast to save M'Cori--and skulking around here in the hills isn't going to accomplish anything. Besides, if I can't make an ally of you, I'll have no choice but to wipe you out myself."

Kane leaned forward earnestly, pressing his advantage. "Actually my men and I would be hunting you down even now, if I had not discovered that Efre intends to dispose of me as soon as I have destroyed all resistance to her rule. The witch's treachery went too far when she plotted against me.

"Moreover, I've grown disgusted with her methods--with these hideous sea demons she has formed a pact with. Despite the lies you've heard of me, I only entered Efre's service to command her military forces--the same as any mercenary general would do. Black sorcery and wholesale massacre sicken me--to say nothing of the unhallowed bargain the witch made with the Scylredi. I sold her my sword as her general, not wizard--and I fight with weapons of steel, not inhuman magic. I'm through fighting for that madwoman--even if I weren't certain of her plot to kill me once I've done her work.

"So here's my proposal: I want Efre dead. You want Efre dead. You help me, and together we'll accomplish this. In return, you'll get M'Cori back again--and, if you pledge loyalty, I'll let you have Thovnos back as well. Of course, I'll retain the throne of Emperor for myself, and establish my seat of power on another island."

"All very logical but I still can't trust you!" Lages growled, thinking how long he would allow Kane to usurp the Imperial Throne.

"So? Take a chance. All you've ever backed were losing causes. Staying here in the hills is only going to get you killed. Throw in with me, and you'll end up with your girl and a kingdom to rule. You know that

it's a better deal than Netisten Mari I ever really planned to give you."

Lages bristled, but turned it over at length. Really there was little choice--and he knew it. It was a madman's gamble, but Kane was his only hope. "All right," he concluded. "I'm in with you. But if this is a trap, Kane--I warn you..."

"I knew you could listen to reason," congratulated Kane, grasping his hand. Lages knew a flash of déjà vu. "Now we've got to make plans fast."

XXXI

Gather the Gods

On a dark night some five days after his departure from Thovnos, Kane sailed into the harbor of Prisarte, his fleet crowded to the gunwales with almost a thousand Imperial soldiers. Together with another seven hundred of his own men left with Imel in Prisarte, Kane calculated he had strength enough to take Dan-Legeh by stealthy attack and hold it until the city grew accustomed to his being in command. No one noticed anything amiss, as the soldiers disembarked from the warships in the darkness. It appeared at first glance as though Kane had returned from a normal campaign.

Quickly Kane met with Imel and informed him of Lages's alliance. The renegade filled Kane in on developments since his departure. Imel was enthusiastic.

"I've brought over as much support as I dared. I could have gotten a lot more, but it would have risked discovery. They'll back you once you make your move. Only the Pellinites, will stay loyal to EfreI, I think. After all, to most of the men Kane is their leader--not some mad sorceress in Dan-Legeh.

"So far there's been no trouble. EfreI hasn't been seen for days. Word has it, the witch is still locked up in her secret chamber with M'Cori--only Lord TloIuvin knows what sort of torments the girl has endured in this time. And most of the Pellinites are still too busy celebrating to pay attention to what's going on. We should take the place with ease."

"Don't count EfreI out just because you don't see her," warned Kane. "That witch is sure to have a few deadly tricks left to her yet. Dolt forget we're attacking her in her own lair."

"Well, the Scylredi can't help her on land," said Imel with considerable relief.

"That's true." Kane scratched his beard in thought. This night would settle the fate of too many opposing ambitions. Perhaps his own, as well. He grinned ruthlessly and drew his sword.

"Let's get started," Kane ordered.

"Your time grows short!" hissed Efre, drawing a final detail to the pair of complicated pentagrams on the stone floor. Weak from terror and the foul drugs she had been forced to swallow, M'Cori lay moaning within one of the complex figures. In the other Efre had positioned herself, along with several articles she would need for her final incantations.

Efre was haggard from lack of sleep, but her deranged mind drove her on to the completion of her grand design--pausing only to take meals and snatches of rest. The spell of transmigration was complicated and difficult in the extreme. Many of the components had to be prepared explicitly for the spell, and often many pages of incantations had to be read over a single phase. Two full days had gone to the preparation of an ordinary-looking paste that had to be used to form a tiny, but essential, figure within the twin pentagrams.

Now the last preparation was complete. Sealing her pentagram, Efre moved to the center and fastened a chain to her ankle. "When you awake to find yourself in my body, I wouldn't want you to wander about and hurt yourself," she told M'Cori solicitously. "After all, it will take you quite a while to get used to walking on only one leg."

Efre paused a moment to savour the despairing sobs of her captive; then she took up her grimoire and began the final incantations.

To M'Cori's drug-clouded mind, the abominable incantation went on forever. An eerie chill stole over her body--a numbness that invaded every fiber of her being. Waves of nausea racked her, broken by searing blasts of intolerable pain. An all pervasive lethargy made even breathing an unendurable effort. Slowly she felt her soul being sucked down into a whirlpool of darkness, her physical self drifting farther and farther away from consciousness...

The guards at the city gate still thought nothing amiss when a gang of fellow soldiers staggered up to them and demanded in drunken tones to be let out. Then suddenly knives flashed, and the Pellinite guards died without an outcry. Quickly the gates were opened, and Kane slipped through--followed by silent files of his soldiers.

"All right, here we split off and head for Dan-Legeh from different routes," he ordered. "Each group captain remember: Keep together, move fast, and try to raise as little hell as possible. Tell people anything, and try to avoid fighting until you reach, the fortress. This has to be finished before the Pellinites can suspect anything. Good luck!"

Kane tersely whispered final instructions to Imel and Lages, then strode away with Arbas at the head of his own band.

The march through the streets was largely uneventful, and only a few occasions necessitated swordplay. But as Kane's men converged on Dan-Legeh, the populace knew something was afoot--and the wise ones bolted their doors and prepared to mind their own business.

At Dan-Legeh, the guards had been alerted by the sight of a small army advancing through the streets toward the citadel. The fortress's basalt walls were bristling with men and weapons hastily summoned in the middle of the night. Even so, discipline had been lax following the great victory, and a good percentage of the men were still out celebrating. The reduced garrison looked nervously down upon the encircling soldiers. An attack on Dan-Legeh at this moment was absurd to contemplate--thus only a skeleton force had grudgingly remained to man the stronghold.

"What's going on out there?" demanded the captain of the guard from time to time. Only silence answered him. Lies could do nothing but verify their suspicions.

Finally Kane judged his men were in position--and shouted a challenge. "This is General Kane! I've uncovered a full-scale plot by Oxfors Alremas to seize control of the army! I've come to arrest the conspirators! As your general, I'm ordering you to surrender Dan-Legeh to my men! If you don't, I'll pull it down on your heads!"

The captain was not buying any. "Treason, is it! We owe allegiance to Pellin, not to a devil of a pirate mercenary!"

"Open fire!" yelled Kane, and a volley of arrows shot from his soldiers' ranks, raking the parapets. Their fire was answered, and the battle for Dan-Legeh began. The Pellinites were short of men and unprepared, but they had the security of a formidable fortress. Kane knew it was going to be a bloody struggle, and that it must be quickly concluded.

Using anything for shelter, Kane's soldiers kept up a deadly fire at the defenders. Arrows and spears fell in an invisible hail of death, and the night air was filled with shouts and cries of pain. Curious citizens came to investigate--and quickly fled, or were cut down by those in the rear. Alarm of the combat immediately spread to the soldiers encamped beyond the city walls--but those who were loyal to Pellin found the gates of the city held by Kane's men. Then, as word of Kane's coup d'état circulated, they were instantly set upon by factions loyal to Kane. Fighting erupted throughout the city.

A moat surrounded the fortress, crossed at the main gate by a drawbridge. Improvised bridges of wagons and other loose material allowed men to cross to the walls, advancing beneath interlocked shields and crude mandate. Covered by punishing fire from Kane's archers, they finally succeeded in climbing to the top of the wall, although initial casualties were spectacular. But the Pellinite guard had no reserve to replace its fallen, while Kane's force outnumbered them heavily. A death blow was struck when some of Kane's men atop the wall succeeded in overturning a vat of boiling pitch onto the soldiers who rushed to repel them. By the time the Pellinites struggled over the flaming pile of dead, Kane's soldiers occupied a section of the battlement.

A foothold was established. Then more and more men were swarming up the ropes and ladders, forcing back the desperate defenders of the gate. It was a vicious fight, but finally Kane's men reached the controls of the drawbridge and dropped it. The main gate swung open. At the head of his soldiers, Kane led the howling band into the fortress itself.

The pain passed, then the sickness. Even the cosmic blackness at last began to fade into grey.

Light.

One eye opened. Images took shape. Images subtly distorted from their familiar patterns.

Two eyes opened. Emotion shook their unaccustomed focus. Tears blurred the shapes that leaped from the gloom.

Hesitant fingers softly caressed the smooth lines of her face.

A laugh of ghoulish triumph echoed from lips that had never formed such tones before.

Efrel was admiring her new body in incredulous delight when Oxfors Alremas came dashing into the chamber. He gaped at the uncanny scene before him in astonishment.

"Hello, Alremas," smiled Efrel, and posed provocatively. "How do you like me now?"

Alremas gasped in stunned disbelief and stared at the blond beauty who spoke to him with Efrel's inflections. He was unutterably shocked, even though Efrel had hinted to him of her intended revenge. His mouth opened foolishly for a moment, before he found speech.

"Efrel! By Lato--have you really done it! Have you indeed transferred your spirit into M'Cori's body?" Efrel laughed prettily. "Shall I prove it, then? On the night of my sixteenth birthday, I met you in the gardens as you had begged me to do, and you suggested that we move back from the path to talk..."

Alremas stood stunned as she finished the anecdote. None other had ever known of his attempted seduction that had proven the reverse once they entered the shadows.

"Now take that silver dagger from the stand, and open this pentagram," she ordered. The tone and inflection were Efrel, although the voice was M'Cori. "There's keys there too for these chains. Hurry up! I want to feel what it is to walk about again."

Collecting himself, Alremas rushed to comply, explaining in agitated tones: "You've got to come immediately! The fortress is under attack! Kane has risen against you! He's at the gate this moment with hundreds of men behind him. I understand the devil has even brought Lages with him. Things look bad for us!"

Efrel's beautiful face was demonic in rage. "Hurry with these chains, you fool! I should never have let him live after he killed Maril! Another general could have finished with Lages and his pathetic remnant of the Imperial army. Curse his thrice-damned soul! Kane shall pay for this treachery as no man has ever I'll prepare a reception for Kane that he wasn't expecting!"

The last chain fell loose. Howling imprecations, Efrel ran up the stairs from the chamber--not even pausing to cover her nakedness.

Behind her in the silent chamber, M'Cori slowly regained consciousness. She opened her single eye,

gazed at her body--and screamed.

With the entrance to Dan-Legeh secured, Kane's forces quickly overran the guards along the wall and passed into the sprawling citadel. Inside, soldiers were boiling up like bees from an invaded hive. The Pellinites fought hard, but Kane had the strength of numbers. Foot by bloody foot, he and his men gained ground.

His right arm was nearly healed--thanks to his preternatural recuperative powers--and Kane was able to use it sparingly. A long dagger in his right fist, sword in his left, Kane fought like a madman. Faces rose and fell about him as he steadily hewed his way through the stubborn Pellinite resistance. Behind him, his men kept up the relentless pressure.

With M'Cori primarily in his thoughts, Lages soon separated from Kane in the spreading melee. With a band of his own men, he pushed his way through the maze-like corridors of Dan-Legeh, searching for his beloved. Doubt tortured him, as Lages had no certainty that M'Cori still lived--or whether she would want to live if he did rescue her. Perhaps she had been murdered at the inception of the attack.

Lages and his men, encountered fewer and fewer soldiers as they followed through the winding hallways, getting ever farther from the canted battle as they descended to the lower levels. Leaving the fight to Kane, Lages pressed on, intending to search the fortress dungeons for M'Cori. If he was too late...

Then he saw her. In the darkened passageway beyond, naked and terror-stricken, running toward him, her blond hair flowing past her white body.

"M'Cori!" he cried, crushing her trembling body against him. "Thank all the gods that I've found you safe! What have they done to you! Kane said that Efre! was going to..."

Efre! buried her face in his shoulder and sobbed. "Kane! Don't speak that accursed name to me! I've only now escaped from his private chambers. Oh, Lages--it was terrible! That first night he came in and forced me to do his will! I fought but he was always too strong. He'd beat me until I couldn't take any more pain--I had to surrender to his depraved lusts. I begged him not to..."

The hallway swan before Lages in a crimson haze. "Kane told me you were imprisoned by Efre!," he began in a strange voice. "I joined forces with him to rescue you and to kill the witch."

"Oh, I know! Kane boasted tome of his plans before he left for Thovnos. Lages, Efre! was never behind this conspiracy! She died months ago on Thovnos. This has all been a plot by Kane. He found some mutilated beggar-woman to pretend to be Efre!, and used that deception to form the nucleus for the rebellion he has secretly led all along. Now the Pellinites have begun to suspect his ruse, and they've started a move to get rid of Kane. Kane had to destroy them before that could happen. So Kane tricked you into helping him solidify his phantom rule."

Her face twisted in terror. Hysterical tears choked her words. "Oh, darling, now he'll kill you, and take me again to... No! Kill me now! Please! I couldn't endure his lusts far another night!"

Lages felt a roaring in his brain. He fought to, speak coherently. "Hide in the lower chambers. I'll come for you when this is over. There's no need to fear Kane any more. I'll bring you that treacherous devil's

heart!"

Lages turned and ran down the hall--babbling of treachery, ordering his men to spread the word to attack Kane's followers.

Efrel doubled up with laughter.

The first group Lages came upon was led by Imel, who with a few score men was searching the lower levels for Pellinite survivors.

"Treachery! Kill the lying bastards!" shouted Lages. "We've been betrayed!"

After only a moment's hesitation, Lages's men turned on the rebels. The passageway flamed into a seething, deadly brawl.

"What the hell!" Imel yelled, and pulled his blade up just in time to miss being spitted by Lages's rush. "I've found out the truth of your schemes!" snarled Lages, slashing wildly. "Did Kane take me for a fool?"

"You've gone mad!" rejoined Imel, retreating in confusion.

The halls erupted into a chaos of struggling soldiers. The Imperial soldiers were in the majority, and the rebels were falling fast. Only the cry of "Treachery!" was understood in the confusion but it was enough to detonate the barely restrained antipathy between the Imperials and the rebels.

Imel realized his plight and fought with renewed vigor. But Lages fenced with blood-mad rage behind his blade, and his powerful strokes were numbing Imel's arm, slashing apart his buckler. The renegade felt panic gibber through his brain. Frantically he sought to defend himself but against a better and stronger swordsman. He was the only rebel left standing now. Bitterly Imel remembered Arbas's long-ago warning and cursed the day he had become involved with Kane.

His defense was faltering, and, he knew it. A sudden blow glanced off Imel's sword and struck him across the ribs. Imel gasped in pain and dropped his guard. With a powerful stroke, Lages clove in Imel's skull.

"There's one traitor down!" he roared. "Now where's the blackest of them all?"

The Imperial soldiers raced through the labyrinthine hallways, picking up support as they went. Throughout the citadel, soldiers who had just fought side by side suddenly turned on one another. Constant suspicion and smouldering enmity exploded in a violent reaction.

At length, Lages burst into the great hall, where he found the bulk of Kane's forces still engaged in a tense struggle with the last of the Pellinite guard. Shouting for vengeance, the Imperials attacked their allies of a moment gone.

Utter chaos enveloped the citadel as three forces locked in a battle to the death. In the confusion it became difficult to follow any one faction. For the combatants, it was sufficient to accept that any man not personally known to them was probably an enemy. Lages caught sight of Kane--battling at the head of the stairway to the balcony above the great hall. "Now I'll kill you, you prince of traitors!" Lages roared, and charged Kane. "You've hidden from death for the last time!"

One glance told Kane not to argue. "You crazy son of a bitch!" he growled, and met the youth's attack. "This is for what you did to M'Cori! And to Maril! And to the entire Empire!" Lages shouted, as he smashed blow after wild blow against Kane. But in Kane he had an opponent stronger than himself--and a better swordsman, as well. He was not able to wear down Kane's guard as he had done to Imel, nor could he force Kane to remain on the defensive.

Fighting silently, Kane knocked aside every slash, parried every thrust, backing Lages to the stairs. Kane was bleeding from several fresh cuts, and his injured right arm was beginning to throb agonizingly. Setting his teeth in a death's-head grin, Kane hurried to finish his assailant. Methodically he pressed his attack upon Lages, but the youth again and again eluded him. Anger and hysteria gave seemingly boundless strength to Lages, and he desperately fought toe to toe with Kane, taking Kane's steel on his shield, striking grimly with his own blade.

The end struck blindingly. Kane countered a vicious thrust--then feinted with the long dagger in his right hand. Lages swerved his shield to meet the dagger blade--for an instant he left an opening--and Kane hewed his broadsword into his adversary's right side. The blade slashed deep--cleaving through cuirass and bone. With a cry of mortal agony, Lages fell backward from the force of the blow, plummeted down the stairs and into blackness.

Kane watched Lages's body roll down the staircase, then turned to meet a new threat. The battle was too hot to waste time sorting out the puzzle. Killing the vengeful Imperial soldier nearest him, Kane wondered what could have happened to make Lages attack him. The matter defied logic.

A Pellinite leaped back to avoid Kane's sword thrust and was neatly skewered by Arbas. The assassin was also puzzled over the sudden reversal of Kane's well-laid plans, but his fighting skill had lost none of its professional polish. Grimly Arbas fought beside Kane, knowing that whatever strange twist fate had taken, Kane would be in at the finish.

"Kane!" The cry was a demand.

"What now?" wondered Kane--and whirled to face Oxfors Alremas.

"I've waited for this moment!" hissed the Pellinite lord. "I've known you for a treacherous pirate from the first. Well, Efrek knows that, too, now and it's a pity I've got to kill you instead of saving you for her vengeance. Still, this is one pleasure I'll share with no one--not even Efrek."

It was a fine speech, but Kane saved his own breath to reply with a flicker of killing steel.

The Pellinite fenced with amazing speed, fighting with catlike grace. Kane had to move fast to parry each thrust, and his right arm was rapidly becoming useless. Yet Alremas, had seldom faced a left-handed swordsman, and Kane's speed astounded him. He had thought such a big man would be slow and awkward. Relentlessly he found himself forced to give ground before Kane's attack. With unfaltering skill his opponent parried Alremas's every stroke.

Then, with a rush of exultation, Alremas saw his sword tip stab into Kane's thigh below the skirt of his hauberk. That should slow the devil down, he thought with a smile, lunging to press home his momentary advantage. It was the last enjoyment Alremas ever would know. Even as his smile broadened, Kane's sword deflected the thrusting blade, spun in a tight arc, and chopped through Alremas's neck. The Pellinite lord dropped dead at his rival's feet, but his head fled away down the stairway.

Pressing his right hand to the wound in his thigh, Kane cursed and looked about him. In the interval while he and Alremas dueled atop the staircase, the remaining Pellinites all seemed to have fallen or fled, and the Imperials were steadily being wiped out by the survivors of Kane's force. Within the citadel, it would only be a matter of hunting down the fugitives. And things must be going well for his men outside, or Pellinite reinforcements would have swamped them by now. If nothing else, Lages's sudden change of heart had ultimately resulted in the destruction of the last Imperial forces.

Tying a bandage to his thigh, Kane smiled wearily. "Well, Arbas," he began, "it looks as if the Empire is mine at last."

The assassin rolled Alremas's head cautiously with his boot and nodded. The head nodded back at the prodding of his toe.

At that moment Kane felt an uncanny stiffness stealing over him. His muscles seemed to constrict, refuse to obey him. Was Alremas's sword a poisoned blade, Kane wondered in anguish.

Then he saw Arbas's consternation--saw that all about the blood-covered hall, fighters were halting in their combat. Everywhere, in the embattled citadel, soldiers felt an unnatural rigor seize their flesh, all power slip from their limbs, as their minds became prisoners within their own bodies.

With one tremendous effort, Kane forced his head to turn about. His astonished eyes beheld a naked girl, completing a series of cryptic passes--M'Cori?

Consciousness returned to Lages through a haze of pain. Slowly he forced himself erect, wincing at the agony in his side. Kane's blade had driven deep, and Lages coughed blood. Several ribs were smashed, and his left arm seemed broken by the fall. He gazed around him in wonder. Except for a mountain of corpses, the great hall was empty.

How long had he been unconscious? Surely there must be someone around yet--someone must be victorious. The fighting must have moved elsewhere, Lages decided. He wondered bleakly if Kane yet lived. The dead on the floor told him that his own men had suffered serious losses.

Bending painfully, Lages picked up his fallen sword. "Got to find M'Cori!" his pain-fogged brain told him, and he repeated to the dead. He forced himself to walk. His steps were dream-like; his legs seemed numb and apart from the rest of him. Remembering that he had told M'Cori to hide in the lower levels, Lages started walking in that direction.

The corridors seemed to be endless. Door after door Lages passed, calling M'Cori's name weakly. Only the dead returned his searching gaze. He passed by the corpse of Imel; the ruined face glared at him accusingly. On and on he staggered through the black stone maze. Were none but the dead left to challenge him?

Then it seemed to Lages that he could hear M'Cori's voice. He listened bewilderedly. It was so hard to listen, to concentrate--even to breathe. But there again came the sound. He felt sure it wasn't delirium. From far below, he seemed to hear the sound of M'Cori's voice.

A black doorway yawned from the wall before him. Yes. It was from here that her voice arose. Gripping his sword tightly, Lages entered the doorway and started down the long dark stairs.

The stairs went on forever, and Lages began to believe he would never see the end. But the voice grew stronger, so he forced himself onward. Then, quite illogically, the infinite stairway came to an end. Lages found himself standing on a low balcony, with wide steps leading down to the floor of a fantastic cavern.

There was a huge black pool, and standing all around were a few hundred soldiers. It was strange the way they just stood there--like so many statues, Lages decided. Then he recognized with astonishment that the soldiers were both his men and Kane's. Yes! There was Kane himself--and with him was Efrel.

But the greatest shock of all came to Lages when he beheld M'Cori--pacing back and forth before the eerily motionless figures. What could it mean? Had M'Cori somehow captured all these warriors? The scene was altogether incredible. In dreamy bewilderment, Lages started to call out to M'Cori.

Then the words she spoke penetrated into his consciousness.

"Ah, Kane! If you could only have seen how surprised you looked, when you felt my little spell stealing away your strength! Now here you stand--with all those traitors who followed you. Completely helpless, unable to walk or even nod your head, except at my command. Remember those others you have seen under my spell? Remember their fate? Won't it be delightful to stand there utterly helpless like this, when he Scylredi come for you? Just like in the nightmare, when you vent to run, to scream but can't. Didn't you once describe the spell in such words? And now you will have the added sophistication of knowing how this nightmare will end."

She laughed in cruel triumph. "And haven't you any words to praise my new body? Beautiful, isn't it? I haven't had the heart to cover it yet. It was so kind of you, dear M'Cori, to give me, your body. I'm sure your father would be amazed at your generosity. A pity Maril never lived to see my vengeance completed. But I haven't asked you how well you like your new body. Speak to me--pretty, pretty M'Cori!"

"Can't you just kill me and be done?" came the hopeless response from the mutilated form.

Efrel sneered. "What? You want death so soon? Stupid little bitch! I begged your father for a quick, clean death--and look what mercy he showed me! What a disappointment I can't arrange for you to savour the thrill of being dragged by a bull through a jeering city! But there's not much left on those bones to maim further--is there, M'Cori?"

"Well, I have the body of the beautiful M'Cori now!" she exulted. "And you'll have to be content with the maimed one your father gave to me? At any event, if it's death you wish, you won't have long to wait. The Scylredi will soon be here to feed. I give you freedom. I'll let you decide whether to dine with the Scylredi--or live yet a while in your new body."

Slowly understanding dawned on Lages. To his tortured mind came the realization that somehow Efrel had stolen his beloved's body. A crime monstrous beyond imagination had been perpetrated by the sorceress. Cobwebs of delirium melted, and he saw things clearly. Strength suddenly flowed back into

his frame. The pain was gone.

With a hoarse shout of "Efrel!" Lages jumped from the low balcony and raced for the malevolent creature who masqueraded as M'Cori.

Efrel whirled in amazement as the blood-smeared swordsman charged toward her. She raised her hand to cast the spell that had trapped her odor enemies--the spell that gave her power over all who entered her fortress. There was no time to halt the vengeful specter.

Lages plunged his sword into the breast of the body he had loved--impaled the desecrated beauty on cold steel.

Efrel screamed as bright blood spurted from the wound. Her fingers tore futilely at the blade. Her eyes blazed with intense concentration, then momentarily went blank.

And Lages looked into the eyes of the girl he loved. Escaping the dying shell, Efrel had reversed the psychic bonds, returned to her own body--and returned M'Cori's soul to her violated flesh.

"Lages... thank you... I..."

The weak voice trailed off, and Lages looked into dead eyes once more.

He started to cry out her name. But the words were choked, as a great rush of blood filled his throat and the last flame of strength failed. Lages fell lifeless over M'Cori's body.

The interval had lasted only a matter of seconds. But it had been sufficient to break the full concentration of Efrel's spell. With a mind trained in studies of the supernatural, Kane fought to escape the weakened enchantment. Summoning up every ultimate reserve of his psychic energy, Kane forced his lips to obey his will. Slowly he croaked the words of the counterspell that he had learned in centuries of delving into the black arts. If only he had correctly identified Efrel's secret spell...

The spell snapped, and Kane was free. Around him the others began to shake off their trance.

But on the floor the twisted body of the sorceress was stirring. In its old flesh, Efrel's spirit was quickly resuming control. Her eyes flashed open in a blaze of insane hatred. Rising to her feet before the stuporous soldiers, she opened her mouth to cast her spell again.

With lightning speed, Kane snatched a spear from the grip of a soldier whose hand had never received the command to release it. Before Efrel could utter a syllable of her spell, he cast the spear straight through her heart.

The force of impact threw the sorceress backward onto the floor. She writhed upon the black stones like an impaled serpent, clawing at the spear that pierced her maimed flesh. Her strength failed.

Efrel uttered a last hideous shriek: "Father!" Then crimson laughter sprayed from her lips, and came no more.

Then came a final horror to surpass all that had transpired. As Efrel's mutilated body fell back in death, its outlines began to blur. The arms lost their joints, the fingers foreshortened. The head retreated into the trunk, as mouth and nose parted into a gaping hole, while ruined eyes grew round and white. Skin color darkened, and glistening slime oozed across the bloated hide. The mutilated legs grew boneless and

attenuated. Before their eyes, the corpse of Efre! began to assume the maimed form of a Scylred.

Shaking the numbness from his brain, Kane seized one of the great oil lamps. He lifted the huge copper vessel on high--then brought it smashing down upon the transforming corpse. A flood of flaming oil engulfed the half-human, half-Scylred abomination. Clouds of putrid smoke steamed up from the crackling pyre.

At that same instant--Efre!'s last cry still an echoing ghost--the black pool erupted with Scylredi. Scores of them had been summoned to the sacrifice. Now the feast began. The sea demons reached out and seized those nearest to the pool's edge, pulling them down into the black water. Yet in the grip of the horror they had endured, the soldiers were too slow in recognizing the doom that had come to claim them.

"Get back!" shouted Kane. Dragging the dazed Arbas with him, he hurtled toward the stairway.

For now looping from the pool were the immense black tentacles of an Oraycha. Somehow the boneless monster had passed through the vast tunnel along with its masters. Like a giant scythe, the tentacles swept across the chamber--smashing dozens of men to the stones in each blow, catching them up in its suckered grasp. The lamps were hurled to the floor, spilling oil in spreading pools that blazed briefly across the bare stones.

Kane gained the stairway, followed by Arbas and several of the others. Behind them the subterranean chamber dissolved into a nightmare of screaming men and feasting black shapes.

Darkness swallowed up the entire chamber and all those who were in it.

XXXII

Farewell

From the deck of the Ara-Teving, Kane watched the ruin-haunted coasts of Pellin drop from sight.

He had escaped from the carnage within Dan-Legeh only to find his forces on the short end of the battle. The heavy losses that resulted from the fight with Lages's men--and the horror in the subterranean chamber--had dealt a mortal blow to his plans. With all of Prisarte raised against Kane, the battle with the Pellinites was going against him. Fighting his way clear, Kane had gathered together as many of his followers as escaped on the Ara-Teving. With ship and crew, Kane set sail, leaving behind him the chaos

of his own creation.

"What was it that happened to Efrele there in her chamber?" asked Arbas from beside him, finding pause at last to reflect. Even the assassin's irreverent tones were tinged with a note of awe.

"The tales of Efrele's demon parentage were true," Kane answered pensively. "Somehow, by some dark sorcery--who knows what Pellin Othrin intended to achieve that night--Efrele was the offspring of an unhallowed coupling of human and Scylred. No wonder her mother went insane that night in the sorcerer's chamber.

"Efrele was beautiful, certainly--appeared completely human. But that's not uncommon among were-beasts--which is roughly what Efrele was, although she couldn't change form at will. I often wondered how she could communicate so well with such alien creatures--her bond with them was a deeper one than any had guessed. Her half-demon heritage explains a lot of other things, now that I think back on it. As to what took place in the end--like a werebeast, Efrele assumed her true form in death."

Kane spat into the water in the direction of the vanishing coastline. "So it seems as though no one could achieve his ambition in this game. And this region is too hot for me to linger in now. After all that has happened, it would be impossible for me to raise another army large enough to consolidate any strong position within these islands.

"No, I think I'll head on south and see what's happening around the more civilized part of the world. It has been quite a while since I tried my luck in the Southern hands. With a trireme and a good crew, there's no telling what I might find to do."

He grinned at his companion. "Care to come along, Arbas? I'll show you lands where a man can carve out a kingdom."

"No, thanks," decided Arbas. "Just drop me off somewhere where I can get a ship back to the Combine and the alleys of Nostoblet. I have a feeling that my calling is to be an assassin, not a soldier of fortune. And anyway, I've noticed that people who come in contact with you don't live long lives."

Kane laughed. "Perhaps another time."

Two weeks later, in the southern port of Castakes, Arbas watched Kane sail away on another voyage of his eternal wandering. The sun was just beginning to rise, and perhaps it was only his imagination that colored the dawn skies so deep a red.