

Misericorde

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The close chamber smelled of stale flowers and staler love.

Tamaslei shook the agate phial petulantly, found it drained of her favorite scent. Crossing her bedchamber with long-limbed strides, she ripped aside a silken curtain and tossed the phial through the window. She drew a deep breath. Chill mountain air puckered her bare nipples. Distantly, the phial smashed against stone.

"I will not love a coward," she said to the night.

Upon her bed, Josin stirred uneasily. The agate phial of scented oil had been another of his gifts. He had given it to her the night before he had killed her previous lover.

"I would do whatever you wish. You know that."

"Do I?" Tamaslei laughed derisively and considered her reflection in the dressing table mirror. Her glossy black hair hung in tangled masses. She flung its coils back across her white shoulders and gathered them at her nape with a gold-chased cord. Tamaslei studied her eyes, as her strong fingers crushed belladonna berries against an onyx mortar.

Josin arose anxiously. He stood behind her, hiding his sudden detumescence from the mirror.

"What you ask is death."

"What I ask is danger. A risk. Surely no *man* would hide his face and creep away on his belly at a simple request from his lady?"

"You ask—you demand," Josin lowered his voice as he glanced at the opened window, "that I steal the ducal crown of Harnstern from the Vareishei clan."

"*They* stole it easily enough when milord Lonal was fool enough to lead an expedition against them."

"Stripping a coronet from a dead man's bloody pate is a bloody different game from stealing it from an outlaw stronghold."

"You always *said* you were the cleverest thief of all Chrosanthe." Tamaslei discovered an errant eyelash, pitilessly plucked it.

"And so I am," Josin reassured her.

"It's only a dingy old fortress," Tamaslei pressured him, "an uncouth band of robbers."

"Who have held these mountains under their command since the assassination of King Janisavion ten years ago," Josin reminded her.

"Who wears the coronet might well claim rulership of Harnstern," Tamaslei mused. "Our lamented duke was slain without direct heir. It will be years before Chrosanthe has exhausted all plots and deposed all pretenders. What the people want now is power—rather, the assurance of power, the symbols of

power. I need not remind you that my own family is one of our city's oldest, for all our fall from grace during these recent civil troubles.

"With the ducal crown—*and* an alliance with the man bold enough to wrest it from these mountain bandits..." Tamaslei applied scent to the vale of her breasts.

"The Vareishei guard their stolen treasures well."

"And you say that you are a thief."

"I say that I am your lover."

"And I say that I will not love a coward."

Josin shrugged his capable shoulders. His mustache made a sad smile into the mirror. He had climbed this far. Dare he climb farther still? He *was* the best. Of thieves. Of lovers. Of ambitious adventurers. Of all this, he was certain. Against the Vareishei? No man had ever won out.

"You shall have this coronet," Josin promised.

"And you shall have my love."

It was a fortnight later.

Two ravens had been cawing at her window.

Tamaslei at last awoke. She climbed from her cold bed. Upon her window ledge rested a shriveled lump of muscle.

She knew it for her lover's heart even before she learned that his head stood atop a pole just beyond the walls of Harnsterm.

It was then that she sought out Kane.

I

Four Names in Blood

"I am told," Tamaslei said to the half-blind lamplighter, "that for a certain amount of gold one may procure the fulfillment of her most fanciful wishes, here in the back streets of Harnsterm."

The lamplighter trimmed the wick and applied his flame. Closing the lozenge-shaped pane, he stepped down from his footstool and hefted his can of oil. He stank of oil and soot, and it seemed that a chance spark might set the old man and his tattered garments ablaze.

"There are many wishes."

"My wish is to speak with a certain man. His name is Kane."

"Dead. Dead, so I have heard. Dead, these many years."

Tamaslei counted gold coins from one palm to another. Josin had once told her that the old lamplighter knew more of the affairs of Harnsterm's underworld than did its denizens.

"But then," said the lamplighter, flipping back his eyepatch to gloat upon the roll of gold pieces, "I *might*

know someone who *might* know where Kane *might* be found..."

Tamaslei permitted a gold piece to drip from her fingers. It rolled into a pile of horse dung beside the old man's filthy boots.

"When I have spoken with Kane in my chambers in the Tameiral Mansion," she said, nodding toward the decaying district where Harnstern's wealth once dwelt, "you shall have five golden companions to clink against this one."

The lamplighter grubbed for the coin as she turned away. "If you live past that tête-à-tête," he mumbled to his beard.

Tamaslei tossed her cloak to a maid and entered her private chambers. She considered the muck that smeared her boots and decided that a bath might remove the stench of the streets from her nostrils. First though, a drink to calm her unease.

Crossing to the decanter of brandy upon the sideboard, Tamaslei started to pour for herself—some indication of the urgency of her need—when she noticed that one of the matched set of crystal goblets was missing. In vexation, she glanced about the chamber, already preparing a tongue-lashing for the servant who had not cleansed and replaced the goblet—and a worse sort of lashing if it had been broken.

The goblet, intact and only just now emptied, was held in a hand that almost engulfed it. Tamaslei splashed brandy onto the sideboard, staring open-mouthed at the man who watched her from the shadows of her chamber.

He was huge—it seemed incredible that she hadn't noticed him instantly upon entering the room, until she thought of how beasts of prey seem to merge with their surroundings. He was dressed entirely in black, from his high boots and leather trousers to his close-fitting leather jacket. As he leaned against the wall, a swordhilt protruded above his right shoulder, showing a complex filigree against the dark panels. A closely trimmed red beard softened the planes of a brutal face, but the cold blue eyes that studied her from the shadow made Tamaslei choke back the outcry that shuddered in her throat.

"Shall I pour?" suggested Kane.

Regaining her composure, Tamaslei promised herself to take pains with the servant who had failed to inform her of Kane's presence. "You came here quickly."

"Bad news travels quickly." Kane measured brandy into their goblets. Close to her, his size was even more forbidding, which made the polished grace of his movements all the more sinister.

"You are Kane." Tamaslei's inflection was not questioning. "Josin spoke of you to me. He called you his friend."

"A man of great promise—and, one would have thought, of keener judgment than to attempt to steal from the Vareishei clan. I drink to a comrade departed."

"And I, to a lover." Tamaslei briefly touched her lips to her goblet "I imagine you will have guessed why I have summoned you here."

Above the rim of his goblet, Kane's eyes were watchful.

"Josin told me that you were the best, the very best. He said that just as he was greatest of thieves because he stole for the thrill of it, so were you greatest of assassins because you killed men for the

sport."

"And for a price," Kane reminded her.

"They say that for ten marks of gold one may purchase a life from you—the life of anyone. "

Kane set aside his goblet. Tamaslei looked into his eyes, and no other answer was needed.

"I wish to purchase a life," she said. "Four lives."

She unclasped a key from the belt of her gown and unlocked the iron-bound door of a massive oaken aumbry. From within she withdrew a pair of leather almoners. Carrying one in either hand, she deposited them upon the sideboard. Returning to the aumbry, she placed two more heavy purses beside the first pair. The decanter and crystal goblets vibrated in elfin cries to the sullen clink of gold coins.

"Each purse contains ten marks in golden coins. For each purse, I demand a life. When four lives are taken these four purses shall be yours." Her smile challenged him. "Or would you think to take them from me now?"

"I did not come here to steal," Kane told her.

"Because even assassins have their code—and their pride—just as thieves like Josin do."

"Certain rules of the game are essential," Kane replied. "Otherwise it isn't a game. For the true adept, wealth is not the object. If I am offered a fee to perform certain assignment, I will not accept that fee until I have accomplished it. Taking a fee by force—or accepting at assignment without the certainty that it will be carried out—would be pointless, a bore."

"Then you *will* accept this assignment?"

"I am bored with the ordinary, and already this problem has surpassed the ordinary. It remains for you to tell me the names of the four lives you desire, and the problem shall be solved."

"Josin once told me that a certain etiquette is involved," Tamaslei said. "I, too, believe in doing things correctly."

She thrust her hand into her boot-top and unsheathed a thin-bladed dagger. Setting its point to her thumb, Tamaslei drew a bright rivulet of blood. Using the dagger as a pen, she wrote a name in blood upon each leather almoner.

Wevnor. Ostervor. Sitilvon. Puriali.

"The Vareishei clan." Kane's face showed interest.

"The Vareishei clan." Tamaslei's eyes were as pitiless as Kane's. "They killed my lover. I want their lives."

"I'm fascinated." Kane's smile suggested some secret jest.

"Further," Tamaslei chose her words carefully, "there is the matter of a certain crown that dear Josin sought to steal for me. Should you chance upon the ducal crown of Harnsterm after the Vareishei no longer have need of it, I shall pay you a most generous price."

"So be it," Kane agreed. "You have purchased four lives—and a crown. I had meant to conclude other business this night, but instead I shall give immediate attention to this problem."

"You will find me most appreciative," promised Tamaslei.

II

Fortress of Fear

Northwest of the Southern Kingdoms, Chrosanthe was a heavily forested, mountainous region of many small villages, usually situated within the protection of an overlord's fortress. Over the years, some of these clustered villages had grown together into fortified cities under the general control of the lord of the castle, who now vied for power with the city mayors. Such a city was Harnsterm, well isolated within the deep valleys and rocky summits of the Altanstand Mountains, but a city of wealth and power for that it had developed along the main trade routes through the mountain passes and across the frontier.

It was a land where central power was difficult to maintain, and only the strongest of kings had ever successfully controlled the wealthy cities and the mountain-guarded fortresses of the powerful lords. Since the assassination of King Janisavion a decade before, Chrosanthe had known only anarchy and civil war that threatened to endure forever. Beyond the security of city walls, Chrosanthe was a lawless wilderness, ravaged by the private armies of the powerful lords and plundered by marauding bands of outlaws. Often the distinction was of little consequence, if it could be drawn at all: the Vareishei were a case in point.

It was generally agreed that Altharn Keep had guarded the major pass through the Altanstand Mountains between Harnsterm and the frontier for centuries before Harnsterm had grown into a city. Other legends, according to one's credulity, suggested that the stone fortress had always scowled down from the precipice there, that its ancient walls were raised upon older walls and yet older foundations—a monastery abandoned for uncertain reasons, a temple to a forgotten deity, a castle raised and toppled in an age lost to history, perhaps a prehuman edifice from the ruins of Elder Earth. Whatever its history, Altharn Keep was as not a congenial locale, and the lords of Harnsterm had not been long in shifting the seat of their authority to a new castle, built along the trade routes somewhat farther within the lands of Chrosanthe, which with the passage of generations became the city of Harnsterm. Altharn Keep, of undeniable strategic importance, had remained under the control of Harnsterm—the command of the fortress and its garrison usually bestowed upon lesser scions of the ruling house.

It was not a holding such as younger sons plotted murder to possess. In the settled years of King Janisavion, no one thought it unusual that Lonal, duke of Harnsterm, had given command of Altharn Keep to a bastard brother, Vareishei. Presumably Vareishei's excesses would have soon demanded intervention, even had not civil war and its ensuing anarchy given Vareishei a free hand to indulge his despotic whims. To pass beyond the Altanstand Mountains meant to pass below Altharn Keep; where previous wardens had collected taxes and duties, Vareishei took whatever he desired. As lawlessness spread and caravans grew fewer, Vareishei turned his attentions to the surrounding countryside and villages, extending his depredations to the shadow of Harnsterm's walls. Lonal at last had led an expedition against his mutinous half-brother. Some of his army returned with tales of red massacre beneath the sombre heights; Lonal never returned at all.

Vareishei might well have claimed lordship of Harnsterm had he long survived his half-brother. Popular ballads had it that Lonal had given Vareishei his deathwound that their skeletons lay locked together in eternal combat upon the field of battle. Those who claimed to have fought in the battle swore that Vareishei had ridden away unscathed. Regardless, Vareishei was not seen again following that battle, and some said he had died of his wounds, and some said he had vanished from his chambers on a stormy moonless night. Some few hinted that his children might know the truth of Vareishei's fate but this was never said above a whisper, and often never a second time.

For some years now Altharn Keep had been held by the Vareishei clan. They were four. Wevnor was the oldest son, powerfully built and a man to be feared in battle. Sitilvon, the sole daughter, was of a subtle mind, and her poisons were subtler still. Ostervor, her younger brother, had some of Wevnor's talents and some of Sitilvon's, and it was not wise to turn a back to him. The fourth, Puriali, was a half-brother, born to a girl Vareishei had abducted from a lonely mountain cottage; Puriali was the only of his bastards that Vareishei knowingly spared, and some said it was out of love for his mother and others said it was out of fear of her. It may have been out of fear of Puriali, for his mother had guided his footsteps upon darker paths.

As central power and the rule of law fast became a distant memory, much as a cancer victim dimly recalls a life without pain, the Vareishei clan assumed absolute rule of the mountains beyond Harnsterm. Altharn Keep was unassailable; Harnsterm dared not spare more of its own soldiers to defend its holdings. The Vareishei demanded heavy tribute from those they spared, and those they chose not to spare might only beg for a quick death. Where their father had been ruthless, the Vareishei clan were malevolent. The people of Harnsterm looked to their walls and prayed against the evil day when tribute would not suffice.

Kane smelled death long before he came upon the caravan. The fresh mountain breeze brought the musty scent of stale blood, the sweetness of torn flesh, and an acrid stench of burning. Moving silently beneath the stars, Kane's black stallion stepped from the edge of the forest and onto the weedgrown trail. Once this had been a well-travelled road, but that was in days when corpses did riot dangle from tree limbs to mark the way.

As Kane passed between the rows of the dead, he heard the sound of hoarse breathing, and paused. One, a boy barely into his teens, was still alive—although, from the blood that yet trickled from his mutilated loins down his legs and into the earth, he would not see the sunrise. Kane cut him down from the limb over which they had bound him. His eyes opened as Kane stretched him out upon the trampled ground.

"The Vareishei?" Kane asked, more to prompt than to question.

The boy answered mechanically, like someone speaking from a trance. "We thought to slip past them under cover of darkness. They caught us at daybreak. They said they would leave us here as warning to those who would cross their domain without paying tribute."

"And afterward?"

"They carried away all to Altharn Keep. They took my sister."

"Doubtless to be held for ransom. Now, let this powder dissolve upon your tongue; it will ease the pain."

The first was a lie, and the last was not, for Kane was seldom needlessly cruel. The artery beneath his fingertips pulsed weakly until he had counted to twenty-seven, then the heart shuddered and stopped.

Remounting, Kane resumed his journey to Altharn Keep. The clods of turf torn by his stallion's hooves fell soundlessly, for the dead cannot hear.

Puriali absently chewed at a tidbit of raw liver as he searched the girl's entrails. His surgery was quite precise, for all that his captive had continued to struggle until a moment gone. Her virgin blood made scarlet rivulets across the polished slab of pale-pink marble.

"There is danger for us."

His half-sister licked her lips. "Do you actually give credence to augury such as this?"

"Not really, Sitalvon," murmured Puriali. "But know that it pleases me. And you."

Puriali wiped his hands against his trouser legs, mingled red with less certain stains as he stayed upward into the night skies enclosing the tower's summit. "Merely a supportive exercise. The stars cannot lie. They warn of death."

Wevnor snorted and tightened his fist about swordhilt. Ostervor shifted his feet and considered his wine cup. The brothers were both tall and black-bearded, though Wevnor's meaty shoulders would have made two of Ostervor; their sister might have been a clean-shaven twin of the younger brother. Puriali, who somewhat favored his mother, was shorter, slighter, with a spiky shock of reddish hair and face too pockmarked to grow a full beard. The two brothers wore leather trousers and stained haquetons, having shed their mail. Sitalvon had thrown a fur cloak about her ankle-length gown, but Puriali stood bare-chested despite the chill mountain wind.

"The stars cannot lie," Puriali repeated.

"Another thief?" Wevnor laughed and nudged his sister. "I hope better sport than the last."

Ostervor did not share their mirth. "I have heard certain reports that Josin's bereaved mistress has made inquiries about Kane."

There was no more laughter.

"Kane may well be dead," Wevnor scoffed finally. "Nothing has been heard of Kane in years now. Some say he's fled the land; some say he's grown old and left his trade."

"And some say he's withdrawn solely to perfect his art," Ostervor said.

"Whatever arts they may be," added Puriali.

"Does it matter?" sneered Sitalvon. "Kane or any other foe—if they come against us, they die. If the stars give us warning, then let us heed them. Let him enter Altharn Keep, if he dares. Others who have tried have scarcely outstayed then welcome."

Puriali pointed upward. "Look."

As if swept over by a black wave of mist, the stars had vanished. Only a pallid sickle of moon interrupted the absolute darkness that enclosed Altharn Keep.

III

The Summoning

Wevnor hunched his broad shoulders and blew upon his hands. Beneath the flaring cressets, frost sparkled upon the massive stones of the merlons. The eldest Vareishei scorned cloak or gauntlets as he continued to pace the darkened battlements of Altharn Keep. Save the measured challenge of an unseen sentry, the thin scuff of his boots marked the only sound of his progress.

Altharn Keep controlled the gorge through the Altanstand Mountains from atop a high cliff, beneath which a narrow roadway crowded passage between sheer walls of stone amid thunderous white-water rapids. More than two-thirds of the fortress walls rose above a breathless precipice falling several hundred feet onto the eroded boulders where the river pounded through its bend. Approach to Altharn Keep's heavily fortified entrance curled along the steep ridge that completed its perimeter. Armies had

attempted assault along this slope throughout the ages, and their bleached bones could be found entangled in the thickets of heather and rhododendron.

No one in memory had forced the gates of Altharn Keep. Guards had always maintained harsh vigilance over those who were permitted to pass through its gates, and with the deepening civil chaos their attentions only grew less restrained. Josin had managed to scale tile walls with a climbing rope, but this initial success had not repaid him. It was always possible—just possible—that an intruder might attempt to enter Altharn Keep by ascending the sheer face of the escarpment and scaling the less well-guarded battlements that crested the precipice. Over the ages a few rash fools had attempted this, and where the river had rolled their shattered bones no one knew.

Wevnor, while he might not be his siblings' equal in guile, was never one to misjudge an enemy, and he did not discount the tales he had heard of Kane. Thus, Wevnor permitted himself a thin smile of vindication when he heard the soft clink of metal against stone.

With surprising stealth for a man of his bulk, Wevnor closed upon the source of the sound: a darkened stretch of the parapet, a hundred feet or more between sentry posts, guarding the most treacherous face of the precipice. Only an eye alert to discover that which the mind knew must be there would have seen it: a steel grapnel lodged against one crenel.

"I would have expected no less of you," Wevnor said softly, even as his broadsword swung downward through the darkness and parted the taut cord of knotted silk. The cord sang like a snapped bowstring, the slack grapnel fell the parapet with a tiny clatter, and the rush of the river swallowed the sounds of whatever might have fallen far below.

Wevnor sighed and straightened.

He heard again the soft scrape of metal against stone.

Wevnor turned. The sickle moon, the distant cressets, together they gave light enough to see the hulking figure in black, idly touching the tip of his broadsword to the battlement. Eyes of the coldest blue caught the wan light as chillingly as did the frost.

"Your sentry," said Kane.

"Damn you!" said Wevnor, and lunged.

Wevnor's only emotion, as Kane's blade checked his own downward stroke, was one of rage. While Kane's physical presence was formidable, Wevnor was himself a man of overawing stature, and he had never seen his equal in swordplay. Their broadswords warred together as if the storm gods gave battle above the clouds—flickering sudden explosions of bright sparks, shattering the night's stillness with tearing clangour of steel against steel. Driving against each other, their powerful two-handed blows jarred through muscle and bone with stunning force, all but smashing swordhilts from nerveless fists.

Wevnor's breath shook in hoarse gasps, and, as he began to listen for the clamour of onrushing guardsmen, he knew that he felt fear. And with that knowledge, Wevnor's desperate parry failed by a fraction of a second, and Kane's blade drove into his shoulder with crushing force.

Even the best mail cannot withstand stress beyond its limits; enough links held to save dismemberment, but Kane's sword bit deep into Wevnor's flesh with bone-shattering force. Wevnor's blade rang against the parapet, even as he was driven to his knees. Numbing, sickening pain racked him, and he knew instinctively that in another instant would be surcease.

Kane, however, disdained the killing blow. Weaponless, his hands reached out for Wevnor.

"Wevnor, come with me."

Ostervor held his breath, gradually increasing the pressure of his shoulder against the black oak panel. He felt his bones begin to creak in protest, then the section of wall pivoted inward, corroded hinges rasping under their first movement in more than a century. Cobwebs hung with the dust of another's ancestors curtained the aperture but the darkness within welled outward with the cold breath of frosted night beyond.

Ostervor smeared sweat from his forehead with a dusty forearm, considering the three depressed inlays in the parquetry of the chamber's floor. Reputedly haunted, the north wing of Altharn Keep had remained untenanted throughout living memory. Ostervor, who had long ago mastered the hidden passageways that crept through the other sections of the fortress, congratulated himself upon his having solved this final mystery. The doggerel inscription upon the chamber's mantle—*One for the Bold, Two for the Gold, Three for to Hold*—had seemed nonsensical to generations of inhabitants. Recent perusal of a centuries-old journal in Altharn Keep's mouldering library had provided Ostervor the essential clue, with its archaic pun on *bold* and *hold* in reference to the coat-of-arms stylized in the parquetry. Other allusions as to the treacherous pitfalls within the north wing's secret ways had determined Ostervor to pursue its exploration after appropriate deliberation. However...

Ostervor did not discount his half-brother's premonition of doom, no more than did he dismiss his own spies' reports that Josin's mistress had sought out Kane. Granting Kane a cunning almost equal to his own—if the lurid tales bore any credence—Ostervor hardly expected their nemesis to present his shield at the fortress gate. Given Kane's reputation—even allowing for the inevitable exaggerations and embellishments—Ostervor assumed that the assassin would seek to enter Altharn Keep by stealth of the most devious sort. The ancient citadel was honeycombed with hidden passageways, all of which (now that the north wing had given up its secrets) were intimately known to Ostervor. It would be a fatal underestimation of their enemy to assume that Kane would not be privy to these secret ways as well.

Nonetheless, it quite unnerved Ostervor to discern recent footprints etched upon the passageway whose dust should not have been disturbed in more than a century.

Ostervor hesitated, scowling at the damp bootprints that strode boldly through the smear of light his candle shed. He had already seen to the citadel's other hidden passages, most of which were known only to himself; a score of deadly traps—six of his own devising and installation—meant certain death for any intruder. Yet, here in this passageway whose secrets Ostervor himself had only lately mastered, another had already gained entry.

Ostervor touched a finger to one footprint, recovering a fragment of lichen, flakes of frost still melting upon it. The intruder had passed this way only a moment before. Ostervor pulled off his boots and unbuckled his sword. The narrow passage was no field for swordplay, and the heavy dirk that he now drew had served him well in close quarters many times before. He placed his candle upon the floor outside the pivoted doorway. Silently, unseen, Ostervor would follow Kane through the north wing passages, trusting to his own fragmentary knowledge of its pitfalls. Kane, obviously, could not attempt their traverse in darkness; he must show a light, and then Ostervor would creep upon him from behind.

Ostervor, however, had not expected tire panel to swing shut as he passed through it.

He counted slowly to fifty, his eyes pressed shut, before he moved. Other than the spectral groan of hinge, as the doorway closed, there was no other sound. At least, he told himself, he wasn't backlit by the feeble glow of the candle in the chamber behind the wall. Kane—and Ostervor had earlier peered

into the passage for a gleam of the assassin's light—had likely passed beyond earreach in search of a hidden entrance to the Vareishei's private quarters. Ostervor withdrew a fresh candle from a pouch at his belt—there was yet another, and a tinderbox to strike fire—and tied a neckscarf about it for bulk. This he wedged against the now-closed doorway, marking its location. Silently counting his paces, Ostervor felt his way along the pitch-dark passageway, following the direction Kane's footprints had taken.

He had counted only seven paces when Ostervor's outthrust fingers encountered a stone wall.

Ostervor halted before the unexpected barrier, puzzled by its presence. He knew to expect the trapdoor paving at thirty paces, to be wary of the pivoting steps midway down the first staircase, to avoid the spring-loaded spears just beyond the second turning—these and other deathtraps were described in the fragmentary journals he had discovered. There was no reference to a blank wall, such as he now confronted.

A later modification, Ostervor decided. At some point the citadel's master had walled off this series of passageways. And yet, Kane's footprints had led this way. It was impossible that Kane could have passed him upon returning; therefore the assassin must have known of another exit from the passage. Or had his returning footprints, no longer damp from the night beyond, left marks unnoticed at Ostervor's first glance?

Stealthily Ostervor retraced his way along the passage, seeking Kane in the other direction. Ten paces beyond the point of his entrance, Ostervor's outthrust fingers encountered a stone wall.

Ostervor swore silently, beginning to know fear. Feeling his way carefully across the blank wall and back down the passageway, his toes nudged the candle knotted within its scarf.

The flicker of his tinderbox was blinding, and his hand shook as he applied its flame to candlewick. Its light was more than sufficient to disclose that the passageway had been walled up at either end.

The doorway by which Ostervor had entered the passage refused to open for all his cunning attempts to activate its hidden mechanism, nor did the thick oaken panels yield to his frantic pounding.

Ostervor wasted most of his one remaining candle seeking some other means of egress. Kane's bootprints, maddeningly obscured by his own footprints, somehow seemed to lead in either direction and into nowhere. Giving it up, Ostervor began to hew upon the oaken panels through which he had entered. His last candle gave light long enough to disclose the steel plating sandwiched within the paneling, but it was little joy to Ostervor that he had solved the mystery of the hidden doorway's solidity.

In the long darkness that followed, Ostervor's kicking and pounding brought no more response than did his screams. The north wing, of course, was reputedly haunted, and seldom was it visited. In time his shouts became a hoarse croaking, his hands raw and bleeding, his body an agonizing mass of bruises from useless rushes against the unyielding walls.

The choking dust only made his thirst come upon him the sooner, so that the torture of his thirst for some time obscured the realization that the air in the passage was growing bad. Whatever circulation might exist, it was inadequate for his needs, and Ostervor was slowly suffocating inside this crypt. He lay motionless, conserving strength, only his brain furiously at work on the problem of escape. Time became a meaningless interval between useless efforts to open the door; it may be that he slept, for the choking darkness gave no indication of tire hours that passed. The poisoned air now hurt his lungs worse than the agony of his parched throat.

Rising from a hopeless stupor, Ostervor knew his strength was failing. He forced stale air into his chest for one last jagged howl of despair and flying his pain-racked body against the unyielding doorway.

The doorway instantly pivoted before his weight, and Ostervor fell headlong into the chamber beyond. Upon the floor beside his face, the candle he had placed there was still burning.

"Time, after all," said Kane, reaching down for him, "is only relative."

Ostervor's hoarse breath melted the flecks of frost upon Kane's boots.

"Ostervor, come with me."

Sitilvon liked to refer to the cellar chamber as her studio. Seated at her writing table, she stared thoughtfully at the half-covered page of parchment before her. Her pen had dried again, and she absently wet its tip with her tongue to keep it from blotting—a habit that left her with a blotchy sort of mustache when she kept late hours in her studio. She considered the now-still body of the youth strapped head down upon an X-shaped frame in the center of the chamber. Beneath his dangling head, a large silver bowl was nearly filled with blood-tinged vomit. Sitilvon reread her notes of earlier that evening, then dipped her clean pen into her inkwell and concluded her notes.

"Subject 3 is young male of sound physique and good health. Force-fed vomitus concentration from Subject 2, placed upon frame. Severe convulsions observed by second hour, increasing intensity with total vomiting of stomach contents by third hour, decreasing soon thereafter. No observable signs of life after fourth hour."

Sitilvon frowned and continued to write.

"There seems little point in continuing this line o study. Despite common belief, it is demonstrable that a combination of arsenic and mercuric salts does not increase in toxicity as the poison is recovered from the vomitus of one victim to the next."

"Obviously you were only diluting its virulence, commented Kane reading over her shoulder. "One might as well maintain that a blade grows sharper each time it hews flesh and bone."

Sitilvon's pen shook a spatter of ink upon the page, but she gave no other outward sign of disquiet.

"The poison might have absorbed certain essences of death from each victim," she said calmly.

"What? Heavy metal salts?" Kane was derisive. "Rank superstition."

She rose slowly from her chair and faced Kane, gaining considerable assurance from the fact the assassin had not simply cut her throat once he had crept upon her unseen.

"I had thought I had given orders not to be disturbed. Shall I call in my guardsmen?"

"They are rather less capable of obeying you now," Kane said.

"What do you want?"

"I should think you must know that answer."

Sitilvon knew, but she also knew that while they talked, she remained alive. She smoothed the folds of her gown across her hips and faced him coolly. While she scorned to take pains with her appearance, she knew her features were good, her figure exciting to her occasional lovers—and Kane, after all, was only a man.

"You are no common assassin," she told him, "or you would have slain me from behind."

"I was interested in your conclusions to this experiment," Kane said. "I had earlier amused myself by reading through your journal. Truly remarkable."

"One would assume an assassin would be interested in the practical, if not the theoretical aspects of toxicology," Sitalvon smiled, edging toward a credenza. "May I drink a glass of wine?"

"It would be rude to refuse you," Kane acceded. "The notes where you established the toxic characteristics of each portion of the monkshood plant were particularly methodical. Forty children—fascinating!"

"Will you drink a glass with me?" Sitalvon invited.

"This vintage has lain in our cellars since it was pillaged before my father's day. None of its has been able to identify it."

She poured two ice-clear goblets with heavy, tawny wine, and then handed one to Kane.

Kane had been watching her every movement. "The other goblet, if you please," he said, ignoring the one she preferred.

Sitalvon shrugged and made the exchange. "As you please."

She took a luxuriant sip from her goblet, then noticed that Kane was still watching her, his own wine untasted. "I'm sure you'll understand if I exchange goblets with you once again," Kane smiled, giving Sitalvon his wine and taking hers.

"Under the circumstances, I can understand your caution." Sitalvon returned his smile above her goblet. She drank deeply, and Kane followed suit.

Sitalvon drowned her laughter in the wine. Both of their glasses were poisoned, for the decanter from which she poured was steeped with enough distillate of the amber poppy to kill a hundred men. Sitalvon, whose addiction to the same rare drug had established an enormous tolerance, considered this tainted liqueur no more than a pleasant nightcap. For Kane, the sleep would never be broken.

Kane drained his goblet. "This is one of the sweet white wines that could be had from regional vineyards where the Southern Kingdoms border Chrosanthe," Kane decided, "until the killing blight of a century past destroyed the grapes there. Its precise vineyard and perhaps its exact year I might have told you, had the wine not been so heavily laced with a tincture of amber poppies."

Sitalvon's eyes grew wide with fear.

"The stimulant I swallowed as you poured for us is quite sufficient an antidote," Kane said gently. "After all, I've had time enough to peruse your journal—and to partake of your sideboard. The opium of the amber poppy is no stranger to me."

Sitalvon realized that her heartbeat was too rapid, too erratic, even for fear. Pain lanced through her chest.

"When you switched goblets with me..."

"Actually, it was in your inkwell," Kane explained.

Her pulse was shaking her entire body. Sitalvon clutched at her writing table, her legs nerveless. Kane's hands reached out for her.

"Sivilvon, come with me."

Puriali dipped his brush of maidens' eyelashes into the jade cup of infant's blood and completed the final astrological symbol within the pentacle's inner circle an instant before the last weakened cry of the newborn. Difficult in the extreme, each step had been, but then the stakes were the highest, and Puriali knew he was too accomplished an adept to fail. He gathered his magician's robes close to his bony knees—it would be catastrophic should one of the lines be obliterated at this hour—and stepped carefully outside of the pentacle. Its outermost circle of power touched the threshold of the tower chamber's door and encompassed half the room. Puriali seated himself at his desk in view of the only door. A block of tarry substance with which he had formed the outer circle lay in his fingers, and his hand hung down only inches from a short gap that broke the outer circle. His lips barely seemed to move as he crooned a low chant in an archaic tongue.

The wait was longer than Puriali had anticipated, but in time Kane slipped past the open doorway and stepped into the circle of the pentacle. Puriali lashed out with his dubious chalk and closed the circle. Kane halted at the sudden movement, watching the sorcerer.

Puriali nodded a complacent greeting. "By now," he said urbanely, "it would no doubt be facetious to inquire after the well-being of my paternal siblings."

"Do you really want to know?" Kane asked.

"Surely you couldn't have thought I bore them any brotherly affection. They would have rid themselves of me long ago had we not needed one another. The solution to the problem is that I was first to realize the others were superfluous."

Puriali's smirk bespoke private jests. He watched Kane pace about the pentacle, seemingly studying its artistry try with the detachment of the connoisseur.

"I imagine you may be curious as to why I have summoned you to me," Puriali suggested.

Kane ceased his pacing and regarded the sorcerer attentively. "I was awaiting a polite opportunity to ask."

"I know everything about you, of course," Puriali assured him with benign humor. "Everything."

"Everything?"

"Which is both why *and* how I summoned you here." Puriali held up a hand to forestall protest. "No doubt you are thinking that you were sent here to carry out the vendetta of some bereaved whore with grandiose dreams. You should have understood by now that apparent free will is only a delusion.

"You were summoned here through my own arts, Kane. I knew my half-siblings hated me, plotted as one to be rid of me whenever it seemed that my arts were more of a danger to them than an asset. Why not? Together we killed our father when his usefulness was outlived. But this time theirs was the error of judgment. I was already too powerful to require their continued existence."

Puriali withdrew a glittering coronet from beneath his robes and jammed it down upon his shock of red hair. "The ducal crown of Harnsterm," he crowed, regarding Kane through over-bright blue eyes. "Fits rather well, don't you agree?"

"Gold can be bent to any shape," Kane remarked.

"Very pithy, to be sure. No doubt your unsuspected wit will provide me with much needed amusement

while you serve my will."

"You were about to explain...?"

"Why, I should imagine it is all obvious to you by now, Kane." Puriali adjusted the crown. "Who else could have murdered Wevnor and Ostervor and lovely Sitilvon? They were far too vigilant to give me the chance."

"And now?"

"And now you shall serve me. With the others dead I shall require a loyal henchman—one who can lead men into battle as expertly as he can weave political intrigue. For this reason I have spared you. With you to carry out my commands, Harnstern is only the first step toward conquest of this strife-torn land."

"An ambitious scheme," Kane commented, "if not particularly original. However, I regret that my own immediate assignments will make such an alliance impossible."

"Alliance?" Puriali laughed. "Not so. It is servitude I demand of you, Kane—although you will find that I am a kind master to those who serve me well."

He rose to his feet and gestured sweepingly. "By now you will have examined the pentacle into which you so obligingly blundered. Still believe in freedom of will, Kane? I summoned you tonight, willing you to slay the others, then to come to me in my tower. You are imprisoned now within the pentacle, held there by the symbols of power that represent the innermost secrets of your existence. You cannot escape the pentacle until I set you free, Kane—and this I will do only after I have bound you to me through certain irrevocable oaths and pacts that not even you dare break."

Puriali savored his triumph. "You see, Kane, I *know* that you are no common assassin and adventurer, no matter how uncommon your abilities. I know who you are."

The sorcerer gestured impressively. "Kane, son of Adam and born of Eve, you are within my power and my power alone. For centuries beyond counting you have followed your accursed fate, but after this night you shall follow only the dictates of my will. I have seen your destiny in the stars, and the astrological symbols of your nativity bind you powerless within the pentacle."

"Most impressive," Kane admitted. "Your work would do credit to a far older sorcerer whose wisdom would transcend this provincial backwater. You have committed only a few mistakes, but regrettably this is not an art in which one learns through experience."

"In time even the stars change," Kane explained, casually stepping out of the pentacle, "and yours are not the constellations of my birth."

Puriali shrank back against the tower wall, seeking in vain for an avenue of escape.

"And it's ironic that you hadn't known Eve was only my step-mother," Kane continued, reaching out for Puriali, "inasmuch as I rather suspect there's some trace of my blood in your veins."

"Puriali, come with me."

IV

Payment in Full

Tamaslei awoke from dreams of Josin to discover Kane seated beside her bed. It was not a pleasant

prospect, and she clutched the fur robes protectively about her silkclad shoulders. Remembering the thin-bladed dagger sheathed just behind the headboard, she regained composure.

"What do you want, Kane?" Her voice was surprisingly level.

"Payment. I have completed my part of our bargain."

Tamaslei turned up the wick of her bedside lamp, increasing its companionable glow to brightness that split the chamber into shadows. Her figure was supple beneath the translucent silk.

"No doubt there is proof?" Tamaslei's eyes were upon the large bag that Kane carried. Its leather folds seemed too flaccid to contain the evidences she expected.

Kane's tone was formal, but held neither rancour nor scorn. "Tamaslei, I give these to you in accordance with our agreement."

He took her hand and dropped several bright objects onto her palm.

Tamaslei's first thought was that they were jewels, then she saw they were something more. They were four oblong sigils carved of some crystal resembling jet, approximately the size of the first joint of her thumb, unusually heavy for their size and curiously warm to the touch. Each bore a carving upon its flattened side, and each carved figure was different: a dragon, a spider, a serpent, and a scorpion.

"I'm not certain I understand the jest, Kane. I hired you to kill the Vareishei clan, and unless you have brought me their heads as proof that you have fulfilled our bargain, I insist upon awaiting news of their deaths before I give you payment."

She had expected protest, but Kane's voice was patient. "You did not ask me to kill the Vareishei clan; you said you wished to purchase their lives. You were most explicit."

"Come to the point of your jest, Kane."

"There is no jest. You made a contract to purchase four lives. I took four lives. You hold them in your hand: Wevnor, Ostervor, Sitolvon, Puriali."

"Do you think me a fool!" Tamaslei slid closer to the hidden dagger.

Kane took the serpent-carven sigil from her hand and pressed it to her forehead. Tamaslei stiffened for or a moment, then flung herself away with a violent shudder.

"The secret is all but lost," Kane said, "but I assumed you understood when you agreed to our contract, and I took from them their lives as I promised to do."

"And what of their physical bodies?" Tamaslei no longer doubted.

Kane shrugged. "Lifeless carrion. Perhaps their followers were of a mind to burn their bodies upon a pyre of their stolen riches, perhaps they left them for the ravens. Their life-force remains imprisoned within these sigils."

"And what shall I do with them?"

"Whatever you wish."

"If I smash the sigils?"

"Their life-force would be released to reanimate their former flesh, such as may remain of it. However transient that experience might be, it cannot be a pleasant one."

Tamaslei rose from her bed and seated herself at her dressing table. One by one she dropped each sigil into her onyx mortar, smashing brutally downward with its pestle. The crystals shattered under her determined blows, suddenly disintegrating into thousands of dull granules. The sound of their shattering was like a cry of anguish.

When she had finished, Tamaslei seemed to remembered Kane's presence, like one recalling a long-ago dream. "And the coronet?" she asked, coming to herself.

Kane produced the crown of Harnsterm from the depths of his bag. "The Vareishei no longer had need of it."

Tamaslei snatched it from his hand and gazed into her mirror. Her eyes glowed as she adjusted the crown upon her head.

"There remains the matter of payment," Kane reminded her.

"Of course! And you shall find me more than generous."

"I only demand payment as agreed upon. A game is pointless if one disregards its rules."

Tamaslei unlocked the iron-bound door of her aumbry, as Kane held open his bag. One by one she drew them out: four bulging leather almoners, a name written in blood upon each heavy purse. One by one they disappeared into the black depths of Kane's bag.

"I have kept these forty marks of gold in readiness for you, as promised," Tamaslei explained. "I insist on paying you full value for this crown as well. However, I don't have enough gold on hand to make fair payment. Tomorrow evening, when you call upon me. I shall have obtained the full payment you have earned."

Tamaslei judged that by that time she could obtain half a dozen sufficiently competent and considerably less expensive assassins to lie in wait for Kane.

"The crown is yours to keep," Kane said unexpectedly. "I rather think Josin would have wanted you to have it."

He pointed toward the depths of the aumbry. "If you will just pull out the false nailheads immediately above and below the middle shelf at the left, that will release the lock on the false bottom. Hand me as payment what you find within, and this most interesting assignment will be completed."

Tamaslei bit her lip in anger, wondering how Kane could know of the aumbry's secret compartment. But he was not as clever as he thought, for the false bottom concealed nothing of real value—it was luck that Kane had not learned of the hidden space beneath the hearth.

To her surprise, her fingers closed upon a thick leather purse. In wonder she dragged it out. It was a fat almoner, heavy with gold, just the same as the other four. Tamaslei gaped at it, turning it about in her hands.

There was a name written in blood: *Tamaslei*.

She remembered the thin-bladed dagger beside her bed, then saw that it was now held in Kane's hand.

"Josin knew you were sending him to almost certain death," Kane told her, stepping near. "Josin came to me before he set out, and we made a contract."