

The Book of Kane

Karl Edward Wagner

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REFLECTIONS FOR THE WINTER OF MY SOUL

Since it was obvious that the man was dying, the crowd of watchers had split apart, leaving only the curious or those fascinated by the presence of death. Certainly no man could live with so ghastly a wound; the wonder was that the mangled servant had survived as long as he had.

Outside, the blizzard gathered howling force with each minute—a fury of white crystalline coldness whose blasts penetrated the thick stone walls, raced through dark hallways and billowed the heavy tapestries. Its coldness forced entrance deep within the castle, into this crowded room where an attentive circle of eyes stared down at the thing that gasped futilely in its pool of spreading crimson.

He was one of the baron's servants, a very minor member of the household, whose usual task had been to care for the stables. The blizzard had come with the nightfall, storming suddenly out of the west as the sun was dying. When its first stinging gusts had hit, the court had been filled with scurrying servants, struggling to secure the animals and material within the outbuildings. One man had stayed behind the rest to complete some errand—none remembered what. His scream of terror had almost gone unheard by the last of those stumbling back to the castle gate. But several men had staggered through the near darkness and blinding winds to the darker figure lying in whirling white. They had borne his mangled body into the castle with panic-spurred steps, for no man had seen that which had attacked the human with such savage suddenness and vanished again into the blizzard.

The victim lay close to the fire, partially lifted from the stone floor by an improvised pillow of rags. His eyes gaped blankly in stark horror, and scarlet bubbles broke occasionally from his slack lips. Relentless fangs had shredded the flesh about his throat and chest, foiled in their attempt to sever the carotids only by the heavy fur cloak and the intervention of a protecting arm. This much could be determined from scrutiny of the dying man, whose silence had been unbroken since that one shriek of mortal terror. Several had pointed out that the servant probably could not speak even should he come out of shock, for the awful wreckage of his throat would make speech most unlikely.

There seemed to be no end to the flow of blood that streamed through the rough bandages to glisten on the stones. The one who usually tended only to injury to livestock had been called to help—the baron's physician and astrologer could not be found, assuming he would have bothered. The horse surgeon knew it was hopeless of course, but for appearances he made a few half-hearted attempts to forestall imminent death.

The servant uttered one great, wet cough that merged with a final spasm. The horse surgeon considered the limp wrist, critically pried up one eyelid, and shrugged. "Well, he's dead," he proclaimed needlessly. There was disappointment among the watchers, who had hoped to learn from the victim of his assailant's nature. Over them lay a clammy atmosphere of gnawing fear, and several argued louder than necessary, asserting that a wolf, or several wolves, possibly a snow cat had been the killer. Some had darker suspicions as well, for this frozenland of Marsarovj had its legends.

A sudden hideous movement halted their slow withdrawal! The corpse had lurched upward from the slippery stones! Supporting itself with its arms, it sat half-upright and glared at them with wide and

sightless eyes. Red slobbering lips fought to form words.

“Death! I see him! Out of the storm he comes for us all!” blubbered that thing which should not speak.
“Death comes! A man! A man not man! Death for all!”

The corpse toppled hollowly back upon the stones, now silent.

“He must not have been quite dead,” offered the surgeon finally, but not even he believed that.

I. The Rider in the Storm

Kane at last was forced to admit to himself that he was totally lost, that for the past hour he had been without any sense of direction whatsoever. He kicked his plodding horse onward, cursing the fate that had set him abroad in this frozen wasteland during what seemed to be the worst blizzard in his long memory. The shaggy steed was close to floundering with exhaustion, for even its rugged north-bred endurance had been overtaxed by the days of flight which had left them lost in this fantastic ice storm.

Two impressions filled Kane’s weary mind. One was a sensation of unbearable, soul crushing cold—cold accumulated during the days of travel through the wintered land and now multiplied by this needled wind of ice. The chill sought for him through the thick folds of heavy fur that surrounded him, and Kane knew that when he stopped moving, he would quickly freeze to death.

The second impression was one of awful necessity to outdistance his pursuers. They had dogged his trail relentlessly for the long, cold days, penetrating every trick this master of deception had employed to hide the signs of his progress. But then with the last powers of the priests of Sataki, his pursuers had little chance of missing a trail that no human eye could discover.

Since noon Kane had often been able to catch sight of them, so close had they gained on him. Knowing that they would almost inevitably overtake him by nightfall, he had welcomed the sudden blizzard when it had come. Although he doubted if even this could cover his tracks from the ken of those grim hunters, he hoped to gain invaluable time—possibly to recover his lead over them. But the storm had become a screaming nightmare of white in which Kane had lost his way completely, and now frozen death joined with those others who sought to bring down the ice-encrusted man who slumped forward in his saddle.

Many days behind him and to the southeast lay the independent principality of Rader, once the northmost province of the old Serranthonian Empire, but now broken away in the collapse of the Empire which had followed the extinction of the line of Halbros-Serranthon. Rader had become a frontier backwater after the dynastic wars had destroyed the strength and wealth of the central states and had created a band of desolation cutting Rader off from the civilization to the south. Law had been lost in the imperial disintegration and never restored. In obedience to ancient principle, brute power shaped chaos into a more orderly framework, and Rader had been ruled for the past century (when it was ruled at all) by a variety of warlords. It had been a motley succession, for the land was of little value or importance. Thus its rulers had usually been petty and relatively unambitious men—old nobility, adventurers, robber

barons, and the like.

Until some few days before, Rader had been ruled by the hated exile Orted Ak-Ceddi, onetime bandit leader turned Prophet of Sataki. Under his fanatical command, the dark cult of Sataki had exploded from obscurity into a crimson wave of terror that had overwhelmed the forestland of Shapelifar to the south and had very nearly broken forth to hurl its legions upon the southern kingdoms. But his power had at last been smashed, and Orted had fled the ruins of his Dark Crusade with only a few of his most loyal followers. Safe in the obscurity of this northern backwater, Orted had seized control of Rader with the last remnant of his former strength and had settled down to ponder the tangled riddles of fortune and power.

To Rader had come Kane in the night. As the mercenary general of the Prophet's cavalry, Kane had both been creator of the fighting arm of the Dark Crusade as well as the cause of its ultimate failure. Treachery on Kane's part had first sundered the Sword of Sataki, but Orted's final insane double-cross had brought on disaster for them both. Orted had escaped the ensuing slaughter of his followers, but Kane was trapped by the victorious army of Jarvo. To avoid capture by his enemies he had entered that unhallowed interdimensional corridor cursed by ancients as the Lair of Yslsl. The torments he encountered within Yslsl's cosmic web of soulless horror were such that it might have been better to have accepted the mere physical torture and death from those he had thus escaped.

But Kane at length accomplished that which no other man could have done. He emerged at the one other place on this world where the Lair of Yslsl impinged. It took him over a year to recover from the ordeal he suffered therein, but when he did recover he set out to kill the man who had driven him within the crawling passages of that elder world nightmare. The trail to Rader had taken him from one end of the known world to the other—a trail that twisted, forked, vanished, and reappeared again. But he followed it with a singleness of purpose unfamiliar even to Kane.

And almost four years after the massacre of the Satakis at Ingoldi, Orted Ak-Ceddi found himself alone in his chambers confronting Kane. The brief, vicious struggle ended most satisfactorily for Kane, who was able to present Orted with a curious gem-like crystal derived from the venom of the now extinct tomb worm of Carsulyal. Embedded in his flesh, the paralyzing venom seeped through Orted's writhing form and silently commenced an ineluctable disintegration of every nerve in his body, working from the tiniest to the largest cords. Kane was forced to cut short his enjoyment of the fantastic contortions of Orted's death throes, when the Prophet's guards finally broke into the chamber.

He had vaulted through the hidden passage by which he had gained entrance to Orted's private chambers—the Prophet had not been able to learn all the secrets of his sanctuary—and fled the city before any organized search could be formed. Since that night Kane had been pushing steadily into the northern wastes. But his pursuers were the last of Orted's fanatics, and Kane knew that only death would halt their relentless pursuit of the slayer of their Prophet. Their fanaticism coupled with the few sorcerous devices left to their dying cult had brought them within sight of their quarry after hard days of searching. And then the blizzard had given Kane respite.

His horse stumbled over some buried obstruction and half-fell to its knees. Kane fought to hold his saddle, noticing the crackle of ice encrusted on his cloak. Gritting teeth he lurched from his mount and helped the exhausted beast erect. The agony of forcing his nearly frozen limbs into action racked his powerful frame, and he swayed on his benumbed feet, clutching the neck of his gasping horse for support.

"Easy, boy," he murmured through his ice-hung beard. "Let you rest just a minute." But only a minute, he told himself, and stamped his frozen boots, wearily brushing off the crust of ice that enclosed his body. A

bed of snow beckoned him to its softness, but he hurled aside its temptation. He would not accept defeat this easily. He had cheated death time beyond comprehension, and if he lost here in the storm, his adversary must take him not gracefully, but struggling blindly onward past the extremes of his power. That this frozen elemental fury should be his doom infuriated Kane, and he glared defiantly into the scouring wind. Frustration. His enemy now was utterly intangible—a cosmic entity that heedlessly had engulfed him—whose massive presence now tore at him, smothered his life fire. In no way could he even force his destroyer to take notice of his existence.

Yet it was no ordinary storm, of this Kane was certain. It was too sudden, too violent to be natural; Kane had never encountered anything its equal even on several excursions much farther to the north. It was a witch storm perhaps, for its abrupt ferocity hinted at sorcery. But why any sorcerous power should summon such a blizzard in this wasteland, he could not begin to guess. Surely the Satakis had not evoked it, for it had cheated them of their prey.

The horse whinnied fearfully, and Kane decided he had rested as long as he dared. As he remounted, his steed started in fright. Kane sought to soothe the beast, thinking at first he had somehow startled it in mounting. But the horse was genuinely alarmed, he quickly noted—its nostrils flared and eyes widened in fright. Soon Kane too sensed a presence, an awareness of alien scrutiny. He gave the horse his head, and the animal bolted forward recklessly through the storm. For a tense interval Kane felt the sensation of pursuit, of some entity reaching for him with awful hunger; then the feeling slacked off.

As soon as he felt clear he slowed his mount's headlong flight to a safer pace. "What in the name of Temro was that!" he muttered. At first he had thought his pursuers had blundered upon him, but the horse's reaction and his own sensations dispelled that impression. He had seen nothing, heard nothing—for the howling storm had effectively blotted out and muffled both vision and sound. Yet Kane and his horse had both definitely sensed the presence of something, and Kane knew better than to doubt such extrasensory evidence. The strange workings of his inner mind were not unfamiliar to him, unnatural talents utilized and strengthened throughout his amazing career. And Kane was certain that some form of horrible death had been very close to him in the storm.

Now he strained his senses against the blizzard, while the horse plodded dismally through the rising drifts, his sudden surge of energy dissipated. For a long time there was nothing, until Kane seemed to hear a wild howling that was not of the wind. He inhaled carefully, drawing the frozen air deep into his lungs. Faintly he began to catch the scent of wolf on the stormwind. The horse too caught the scent, and he snorted fitfully.

Suddenly Kane halted. The howling had become more pronounced and seemed to come from many throats. To his keen nostrils came the unmistakable sour scent of damp wolf fur. Somewhere ahead of him—distance was impossible to gauge in the storm—lurked a large pack of wolves. Kane was puzzled once more. From their cries the pack was full in hunt—but it seemed impossible that a wolfpack would be foraging in such a raging blizzard. Perhaps the limits of starvation had driven them abroad, he mused. In that case it was damned lucky that he was downwind.

But this advantage might vanish with a shift of wind and Kane turned his mount away from the invincible pack, putting the wind to his back. Might as well back-track, he thought grimly. With no more sense of direction than he now had, any course was as well as another or as pointless. As he forged onward through the drifts the howling was drowned out in the greater voice of the storm. Just as it was swallowed up altogether, Kane thought he could also hear mingled in the cries of horses and men. But the sounds were too faint for any hope of clarity, and Kane was too exhausted to pursue the fantasies of his tormented senses.

The horse plodded on and on, stumbling more frequently now, but refusing to fall. Kane doubted if the beast would be able to rise once it slid down again—doubted if he would be able to remount if it could regain its feet. Time and distance had no meaning. He was utterly adrift from the world of time and space; there was only himself and the horse caught up in the rushing blizzard. Whether he moved or only the wind moved, Kane could not tell. Nor could he distinguish whether the bits of white moved through the darkness, or flecks of blackness through a sea of white. Now his entire body was growing altogether numb. Soon he would be unable to feel the horse on which he rode, and then there would only be Kane, bobbing helplessly, hopelessly in this maelstrom of ice.

This was infinity.

Abruptly something clawed at Kane's face. He reeled and lashed out at it drunkenly. His frozen hand encountered a tree branch. Several more whipped at him, as the horse painfully slipped its way between several trees.

Kane forced himself out of stupor, gathering together the final dregs of his remarkable strength. If the horse had blundered into a forest there was hope yet. It seemed unlikely, for there had been no body of trees in sight before the storm had hit—but how could he know how far the horse had carried him. The wind's roar became muted, and its force was broken by the trees, causing the snow to fall slowly, sifting through the branches. The blackness of night became settled, and in this darkness Kane's eyes could penetrate—although another man would still be relatively blind.

It was indeed a forest—or at least the grove of trees extended as far as Kane could discover. From the shelter it provided from the stormblast, it seemed likely that this was at any rate a considerable wooded area. Kane urged his faltering mount deeper into the woods. If he could reach a place far enough within to break most of the storm's force, he might build a sort of shelter and possibly get a fire going.

He caught the smell of wood smoke on the wind and pulled up. Had his hunters also found the trees, he wondered—or perhaps he had come upon someone else in this wilderness. He followed the smoke hopefully. Should it be the fire of strangers, he would share it one way or another. If he found the Satakis... Well, he had been hunted long enough. Kane loosened his sword from its ice bound scabbard. At least the cold iron would then find warmth. They would not expect an attack, and maybe with surprise, and if his strength had not been fatally drained by the storm...

Visions of carnage passed through his mind, as Kane followed the scent of smoke through the sentinel trees. The ground seemed to rise now, he thought. Revitalized with the tangible before him, hope for shelter and lust to kill, Kane encouraged his horse. The rugged steed was due to collapse at any step, but it too sensed salvation and forced itself beyond endurance.

The trees thinned and then broke into a clearing. As he came through the last of their number, Kane caught sight of several small outbuildings clustered about a walled stone manor house or small castle. The structures loomed darkly against the snow-filled night skies, their silhouette perforated with specks of light from curtained windows. Desperately Kane forced his mount to this unknown castle here in the frozen wastes. Let it be inhabited by demons and he cared not—so long as he found warmth. He shouted hoarsely as he reached the gate. In sudden despair he realized that no gatekeeper would be at his post on such a night, and that no one within the castle manor could hear him above the storm—should they be awake. In his condition he could never climb over the wall. In white fury Kane pounded on the gate with his great sword. To his amazement the gate swung ajar—it had been left unlocked!

Not bothering to puzzle over this good fortune, Kane pushed aside the gate enough to pass through. The horses hooves clattered hollowly across the courtyard, as Kane shouted wildly, striving to awaken

someone within. Just as he reached the manor's main doorway, the animal stumbled and fell, pitching the rider upon the stones. Kane twisted clumsily, too benumbed for his usual lightning reflexes to serve him. He fell heavily before the door, rolling against it.

With his last strength he battered the iron studded oak with his swordhilt. He looked back weakly to the gate through which he had entered. Just before blackness overcame him, he seemed to see something white creeping through that open doorway.

II. Things Found in the Storm

Something white stood blurred in Kane's recovering consciousness. With an effort he forced awareness into his mind, his eyes to focus.

Her eyes widened in startled fright as Kane's baleful gaze suddenly gripped her, but she recovered quickly and said to cover her embarrassment, "Here—try to drink this."

Kane accepted the cup she held to his lips in silent appreciation, even in his condition savoring the excellent brandy. Warmth flowed from the cognac as fully as from the crackling fire they had laid him by. So the people of the manor had heard his call after all, he mused, and quickly he took note of his surroundings.

He was in a small, stone room, furnished by a few benches, some chairs and a heavy table drawn near the large fire that blazed against one wall. An antechamber, he surmised, from its plainness—probably where the porter and stewards kept attendance on the main door. Kane's ice-crusting cloak had been removed, and a heavy fur rug was thrown about him. Two servants supported him in a half supine position before the fire; several others and a very sleepy maid milled about the room and doorway.

Holding the cup to his lips was a tousled girl of elfish beauty. From her magnificent robe of white snowcat and the emerald set ring on her delicate hand, Kane knew her to be a lady of high estate. A mane of pate blond tresses framed a perfect face from which a pair of wide, grey eyes shone. Together with a pointed chin and straight, finely chiseled nose, she presented the picture of a somewhat whimsical pixie—a mouth made for quick smiles now set in concern. Her age might be from late teens to early twenties.

"Well, Breenanin, what have you found!" A bear of a man swept into the room, a huge fur robe hastily gathered about him. "Who is it that comes calling on a night fit only for ice phantoms and destroys the sleep of honest folk!" he blustered good-naturedly.

"Hush, Father!" whipped Breenanin. "He's injured and nearly frozen!"

"Eh?" muttered the lord of the castle curiously, and he made a vaguely sympathetic noise to mollify his daughter.

Kane shrugged off the servants' hands and drew himself to his feet, reeling momentarily in pain and dizziness before he straightened. He met his host's curious gaze and announced formally, "Forgive this ill timed and unannounced intrusion. I've been wandering through this waste for several days when the storm caught me, and I had about given out before I happened on this castle. My horse fell in your court, and I was unconscious until a moment ago. Had your servants not found me, I would have frozen solid by morning."

“In the court, you say?” said the other in puzzlement. “How the hell did you make it past the gate?”

“It was unlocked when I tried it,” returned Kane. “Most fortunate that someone neglected it.”

“Maybe so, but that kind of carelessness can get you murdered in bed. Gregig ! Can’t you remember your duties just because we get a little snow!”

The porter looked most unhappy. “Milord, I distinctly remember locking the gate when the storm hit. I can’t understand it.”

“ Mmm!” intoned his master. “Well, is it locked now?”

“Yes, milord!” the porter said hurriedly; then uneasily, “It was locked when I checked it—after finding the stranger.”

“At least even a near snowman has more sense than some fat porters.”

“The wind must have shut it—for I didn’t,” Kane broke in.

He received a suspicious stare from his host. “That isn’t possible,” he stated. Then he shrugged. “Perhaps the fall shook up your memory a bit. Not uncommon, I suppose.”

Kane remained silent.

“Well, anyway you’re inside. Welcome to my somewhat chilly manor! I am Baron Troylin of Carrasahl, and the underfed cupbearer there is my daughter, Breenanin. You are welcome to my hospitality until this blizzard lets up and you feel like moving on. We’re always glad for some company from the outside world here—breaks the monotony.” He laughed, “The way that blizzard’s carrying on, it looks like we’re all going to be snowbound for some while.”

Kane bowed. “You are most gracious. I am deeply thankful for your hospitality,” he said formally, speaking the Carrasahli with little difficulty. He watched his company cautiously. “My name is Kane.” There was no reaction, so he went on. “My profession is fighting, but at present I am without a position. I was heading toward Enseljos to see if Winston could use my services in his border war with Chectalos , but I strayed off course trying to save some miles from the usual trails. When the storm caught me, I was very well on my way to being lost.”

Troylin showed no signs of disbelieving Kane, although Kane doubted if he was as simple as his tough and easy manner seemed to indicate. The baron was scrutinizing his guest carefully, trying to form an idea of what the storm had brought him.

Kane was a huge man—not much over six feet, but massively built. From an immense barrel of a chest set atop pillar-like legs, Kane’s mighty arms hung like great corded tree limbs. His hands were of great size and strength—a strangler’s hands, thought Troylin. The man must indeed be powerful, and probably could handle that sword well too. He seemed to be left-handed, as far as the baron could tell. His hair was red and of moderate length; the beard short as well. His features were somewhat coarse and even a bit foreboding, with a fresh scar on one cheek that seemed to be fading.

It was his eyes that bothered Troylin. He had noticed them from the first. It was to be expected, for Kane’s eyes were the eyes of Death! They were blue eyes, but eyes that glowed with their own light. In

those cold blue gems blazed the fires of blood madness, of the lust to kill and destroy. They poured forth infinite hatred of life and promised violent ruin to those who sought to meet them. Troylin caught an image of that powerful body striding over a battlefield, killer's eyes blazing and red sword dealing carnage to all before it.

The baron hastily avoided those eyes and repressed a shudder. *Vaul!* What manner of man was this creature! Still, he was a mercenary, a hired killer. Such men were seldom tender poets. And from his bearing, Kane obviously was no common ruffian. His manners and speech indicated a man of culture, possibly of breeding. Sons of the best gentry, bastard or lawful, often took to a military career for fortune or for love of adventure. Kane certainly was impressive enough to have been a high ranking officer, and the rings and fine weapons indicated wealth at some time. His age was strangely difficult to guess. He didn't look physically over thirty, but somehow his bearing made him appear much older.

Troylin decided he would keep entertained untangling the mysteries of his strange guest for the next several days. Probably have some real tales to tell too. A change from that minstrel anyway. Just a few precautions until he was more certain about the man.

"Father! Are you just going to stand there like a stuffed bear!"

Troylin snapped alert. "Ah—yes! Started to doze, I'm afraid. Well, Kane, as I say, welcome. The servants will show you to a room—plenty here, we're sort of under-populated at the moment. Just wintering away from the civilized world for the rest." It occurred to him that Kane had no business still being able to stand after his ordeal, and he realized again the fantastic strength the man must have. "Right! So I hope you'll be recovering from it all by tomorrow." He turned and strode away.

Hugging the fur about himself, Kane followed the servants. It was all he could do to walk and his sight blurred repeatedly, but he didn't wish to show weakness. At least his hosts didn't guess the extent of his plight. With luck he could hole up here from the Satakis—and maybe the blizzard had finished them.

"Damn lucky we found you," Offered one servant, as he opened the door to Kane's chamber. "No one was on duty, you know. Fallen asleep with that storm blowing."

"Oh," muttered Kane, too exhausted to feel much interest. "How'd you let me in then?"

"It was the lady, you know. She'd been having trouble sleeping, heard it, and run down, woke the porter, Ing and me."

"Surprised she could hear me even, with the wind." Kane gratefully collapsed onto the bed.

"Oh, it wasn't you she heard," replied the servant, stepping through the door. "It was your horse screaming, you know. Poor thing was pure mad from fear! Something sure had that horse frightened near to death—but there wasn't a thing in the courtyard we could see."

III. Prisoners of the Storm

Kane immediately fell into a trance-like sleep, as his tormented body sought to heal the ravages of days of flight. Occasionally its serenity was shattered by some fitful dream of past adventure or by needles of pain from frostbitten flesh, but not even this could rouse him. At one time he seemed to hear again that eldritch howling of wolves, and in the midst of their cacophony two burning red eyes swam into his fevered vision—inhuman eyes that seared him with savage and abominable hunger.

At length consciousness returned to Kane, and with it came the realization that something hovered near his side. Snapping into instant awareness, Kane hurled himself to one side. His corded arm whipped upward and he grasped a shock of white hair, as his other hand came up with the dirk he had strapped to his side.

“Wait! Mercy!” croaked his terrified victim, and Kane halted the disemboweling thrust just short of its mark. He grasped the beard of a stern and elderly face that projected on a thin neck from dark, impressive robes. The robes flopped in extreme agitation, and a pair of scrawny hands clawed in panic at Kane’s grip. Kane released the old man, but retained his knife watchfully.

“By the Seven Eyes of Lord Thro’ellet!” choked the elder, massaging his bearded visage. “Damn near rip off my face and slit my gullet, you did! Vicious killer, that’s what! A mad dog! What has my good baron taken in?”

“Who the hell are you?” Kane growled.

“I’d warned him about strangers! The stars tell plainly that these are deadly days for us all—but he won’t listen! Brings in a demon from the storm and expects me to concern myself with him. I warn you, you low born spawn of a viper! I don’t intend to let this near murder go forgotten!”

“Why were you in here?” snarled Kane dangerously.

The elder looked alarmed once more. He judged the distance to the door, decided it was too far, and collected himself. “I am Lystric, Baron Troylin’s personal physician and astrologer. You’ve been snoring away here better than an entire day now, and the baron told me to look in on you.” He glared darkly at Kane. “As if a frolic in the storm would bother an ice phantom! I try to examine your injuries, and you half kill me for my concern! Fine gesture! Nice mannered guest! Troylin should have slaughtered you in your sleep!”

“That’s been tried before,” returned Kane, swinging to his feet. “Count yourself lucky that I recognized you as a harmless old lecher before I spilled your insides out. But as you have seen, I’m quite all right now.”

Lystric reddened in anger. “Damn you! I warn you that my wisdom holds secrets that could blast you to ashes, should I see fit to unleash them! Maybe I will! This is no time for Troylin to bring murdering strangers into his hold! There is death in the stars! I have seen it!”

Kane regained his temper with painful effort. “Would you care to examine me now?” he asked innocently.

“Damn your insolent hide!” shrieked Lystric and stamped toward the door, a stately exit which he ruined by glancing behind in apprehension. Halting at the door he glowered back. “The baron directed me to ask you to dine with him shortly, should I find you not too weak to stir!”

“Send my thanks and tell him I accept.”

“No doubt! Well, he’ll send his men-at-arms to butcher you, if I have my will!”

Kane elaborately drew back his dirk to throw. Lystric departed.

There was a tight atmosphere of uneasiness hanging over the dinner table, and Kane noticed it despite his preoccupation with the board. He ate his first full meal in many days with careful attention, savoring each mouthful. A man who has been on short rations for many days does not bolt his food—it is a novelty to be slowly and thoroughly appreciated. At the same time he watched with interest the others gathered at the long table in the castle dining hall. Baron Troylin and his daughter ate nervously, with a forced lightheartedness that belied an underlying tenseness. Lystric the astrologer, who was also present at the high table, spent part of the time offering Kane dark looks, and the remainder watching anxiously the young man sitting next to him.

The youth Troylin had introduced as his son Henderin. Ignoring Kane’s greeting, he had spent the first of the meal glaring stonily at the food set before him. Kane observed that Henderin carried no knife with which to eat, and that the two brawny attendants who stood close behind him seemed to pay an unnecessary amount of attention to their charge’s every move. No comment had been offered on the situation, and Kane had discreetly raised no questions, although it was obvious that something was amiss in the household and that the baron’s son seemed to be the center of the anxiety. He was a well built and well favored young man—a few years his sister’s senior—with the pale blond hair of his family. He bore no signs of ill treatment, although he somehow impressed Kane as a privileged prisoner who was allowed to sit in at his captor’s table.

Henderin chose to end his petulant silence by breaking into an anecdote of his father. “This meat is burned!” he intoned hotly. “I specifically told you to bring me nothing but *raw* flesh!”

The two retainers behind him stood poised. Breenanin halted her cup before her mouth and froze in anticipation, while Troylin nervously glanced toward Lystric. The astrologer spoke in soothing tones, “Of course—the cooks must have forgotten. I’ll personally speak to them about this. But since all the rest of us are eating, why don’t you have a little cooked meat too. It’s still nice and red, you see—all the fire did was warm it for you.”

“I said I wanted raw flesh!” Henderin exploded. “Not burned dead by the fire, but still warm and bleeding! Bring it to me!”

Lystric went on hurriedly. “But there isn’t any meat left that hasn’t been cooked. So why not eat just a bite...”

Henderin screamed an oath and hurled his plate onto the floor. Behind him the two attendants rushed in, but Lystric waved them to a halt. Several hounds had sprung from the corners of the hall and had fallen upon the scattered meat. Henderin watched enthralled as they greedily fought over the scraps. With a wild smile he snatched a large joint of meat from a tray, pulled it to him, and buried his muzzle into it. He tore the flesh in large chunks, devouring it with gusto. From time to time he gave a low growl.

For the others the meal proceeded with relative quiet.

With the business of eating completed, the dinner began to gather steam. Servants cleared away the debris and settled down to the more serious duty of keeping their master and his guest well supplied with

ale. Kane prepared himself for a long evening of drinking and conversation, aware that Troylin expected him to repay the baron's hospitality by entertaining him. It appeared to be developing into a most comfortable evening. At the lower tables, the baron's retainers and men-at-arms were making a lusty charter, serving wenches made free with the ale, and the great fire was blazing. Even Henderin was quiet, for the moment slowly drawing pictures on the table with an ale dipped finger. In the shadow of a column close by the high table a tall man toyed with a lute.

Kane had asked few questions during the meal, and to his relief neither had Troylin. The baron seemed content to accept Kane's story at face value, and merely listened with interest to his guest's anecdotes. To his delight, he found Kane an entertaining and informed conversationalist, with a fantastic variety of material to draw upon. Deeming it none of his concern, he showed no interest in Kane's business in this region.

Judging it not altogether indiscreet, Kane at length asked, "How is it that you are wintering here in Marsarovj? Even Carrasahl must be warmer and more congenial than this wilderness."

Troylin laughed depreciatively and replied readily, "Well, I got tired of civilized winters after a while. So I thought it would be a nice change to spend the winter here in the provinces. My family has maintained this old castle for years—it's really a fortified manor from the Empire days—and I thought it would make a snug, rustic spot to spend the winter. Hunting is excellent too—all year around."

He lowered his voice and added uneasily, "Also I'd hoped the atmosphere would be good for Henderin. The boy's a little unsettled, you've noticed no doubt. Lystric assures me though that this is just the thing for him."

Kane nodded and changed the subject to the matter of hunting. Marsarovj, he knew, was a province rife with subarctic game.

He became conscious of all unpleasant sensation of scrutiny after a while and looked for the source. In the shadows slouched a figure with a lute, a lean man whose eyes gleamed a startling red in the firelight.

Following Katie's gaze, Troylin caught sight of its object and called out, "Ah, Evingolis! There you are! Wondered where you were lurking tonight. Come over and give us a tune! We've been jabbering too hard to do any serious drinking." Turning to Kane he said, "This is Evingolis, the most accomplished minstrel you'll ever have the pleasure of hearing. I had the fortune of attaching him to my patronage this summer, and he's a delight to have around on these winter nights." He went on to describe the many virtues of the minstrel.

The object of the baron's praise strode silently from the shadows and took a vantage point by the fire. Moving his long fingers over the lute strings with fluid grace, he sang in crystalline tones of a blind princess and her demon lover. One of the Opyros Cycle, Kane recognized, and he recalled the bizarre fate of that blighted poet. The minstrel was himself an unusual figure. He was an albino, with the characteristic pale skin, white hair and pink eyes. Kane could hazard no guess as to his nationality, having found the singer's accent unlike any he could place. In height Evingolis was several inches taller than Kane, and although he was thinly built, there was no hint of softness or weakness to him. His features were finely molded, but sharp rather than effeminate. His thin hair he wore cut short; his face cleanshaven. As he sang, his pink eyes stared into infinity—perhaps seeing the strange events of which he told. Kane noticed that Henderin watched the minstrel with rapt attention, seemingly magically charmed by the tale.

The rising lament that concluded the song died out with a keening moan from the lute. He was an artist, conceded Kane, who could not recall hearing a better performance of that difficult poem. Men shuffled

their feet and made uneasy sounds in the stillness following the song. “Excellent!” commended Troylin after a pause. “You always have something now for us, don’t you. Ah, how about another, Evingolis. One a bit more rousing for this cold night.”

“Of course, milord,” spoke the minstrel, accepting a tankard from a scurrying wench. “One moment while I sweeten my throat.” He tossed off the ale and broke into a rollicking ballad of a woodsman’s five daughters, which moved the baron’s men to join in the bawdy chorus.

“A bit morbid in his tastes,” confided Troylin, “but if you insist he can be common enough.”

“Some hold that true beauty lies only in the uncommon,” Kane murmured, watching the firelight’s gleam in Breenanin’s pale hair. She smiled, wondering if his remark was to compliment her. But Kane, sunken into brooding, noticed only that her teeth shone white and sharp against her red smile.

The baron was involved in an endless anecdote of a winter hunt he had once, enjoyed, and Kane had for some time been making only a taken attempt to pay attention. At the point when some stag was goring a favored hound, several of Troylin’s men entered the hall, loudly stamping snow from their gear.

“Well, Tali. Back at last, I see!” Troylin greeted their leader. “What’s it like out there?”

“A white hell, milord, it truly is! So cold your spit cracks in midair, now that the sky has cleared. And the snow’s piled so damn high, it was almost impossible for us to push through as far as we went. Couldn’t even get a sled out in that stuff. We’re snowbound for certain until this crusts over solid.”

“No matter,” said the baron. “We’ve provisions here to last all winter, and there’s plenty of game, I know.”

Tali shook his head. “I don’t know myself on that one. The area is full of wolves, for some reason. Big, mean fellows—and bold ones too! Saw maybe half a dozen at one time following us along—keeping just out of bowshot! Looked like they’d just as soon rush us, they did! Game must be scarce to bring them out in the open like that.

“And that’s not all, milord! We stumbled on something really terrible out there in the snow! Came on it just as we was starting back. Party of dead men, it was, milord!” A horrified rustle went through the listeners. Tali gulped and plunged on. “Looked like eight or nine of them and horses too, but they were so torn up it was hard to say for sure. Wolves got them—ripped them to shreds! My guess is that they were attacked in the storm when they couldn’t see what was happening. Must have been a really big pack to attack that many men. All armed too, they was. Course you couldn’t tell much, but their gear was strange. Not like anything you see around here. Well, when we saw this, you bet we turned around! Beat it back here fast as we could! Wolves attacking armed parties—I’ve never heard the like!”

He tossed a gold medallion onto the table. “Saw a couple of these around the bodies.”

Baron Troylin frowned. “Well, wolves can’t get to us in here,” he concluded. Which seemed to strike Henderin as quite amusing.

Kane examined the gold medallion with its familiar circle of elder hieroglyphics. The followers of Sataki would hound him no further.

IV. Hunters in the Snow

“Personally I think the baron is crazy to ride to the hunt after what Tali and them told us last night,” observed the steward, evidently in a loquacious mood.

“ Mmm?” Kane, grunted noncommittally , while he tested the balance of several hunting spears.

“You didn’t bear all those things they told to us afterwards. Brrr ! When I think about those poor devils they found out there! Not much left but bare bones, they said! All those wolves around, and the baron still says it’s a beautiful morning to hunt! I’d think after all you’ve been through, sir, you’d of had your fill of all that snow.”

Kane selected the best spear and felt the edge of its iron head critically. “Ought to do it,” he concluded. “I doubt if there’ll be any problem with wolves. They probably attacked those others because of the storm. Our party is large enough, and the light of day will keep them hidden probably. And in the woods the snow’s thin enough in most places so a horse won’t bog down. Problem will be to run down any elk.

“Of course,” he went on carefully, “I guess the game around here must be pretty sensational for the baron to drag his household all the way up here in the middle of nothing.” He watched the steward fidget nervously, fighting to hold his loose tongue. “Or was there some other reason for this exile?”

It was too great a temptation. “I don’t suppose the baron would care for you to know about it,” the steward began, looking around dramatically, “but someone’s sure to tell you, and so I might as well. Since it doesn’t do no harm anyway.

“Baron Troylin *had* to leave Carrasahl! That son of his, you know, him being crazy as an owl and all! Why, they were some actually talking about *burning* poor Henderin! So the baron pulled out to let things cool off. And Lystric—he’s in charge of the young man, you know—said it would be good for him to get out away from things. All this is supposed to be soothing to his mind. That’s why Henderin does everything nearly that the rest do—except they watch him careful—instead of being locked up like maybe he should. Lystric says he’ll come back to normal easier if he leads a normal day’s life, which seems to make a little sense.

“Personally though I wouldn’t trust that crafty old buzzard—for all his fine talk, he’s just a penny ante wizard! Wouldn’t surprise me at all if some of those stunts he’s tried haven’t just made Henderin crazier. And everyone knows he’s never held down a reputable position for long in his life—until the baron took him on as his son’s physician.

“Beautiful bit of irony that! Few years back old Lystric was providing entertainment at a court banquet the baron attended. Troylin’s drunk and he makes jokes about the old bastard’s spiel. Lystric gets stuffy and he calls the baron an unlettered hick, a feeble minded oaf and all that—so old baron sics the dogs on him and they chase him all down one table through the food and everything. Really was funny! Course old Lystric’s mad as can be, and the baron really had to eat crow to get him to take the position. Still Lystric was all the help Baron Troylin could find after what Henderin done.”

“Just what is it about Henderin that made people talk about burning him?” asked Kane. “Madness isn’t usually treated quite that peremptorily.”

The steward warmed to his subject. This was getting to the good part. He looked about again and lowered his voice impressively, “Because this wasn’t just some ordinary lunacy. No Sir! Henderin isn’t as harmless as he looks—that’s why they keep so close a watch on him!

“Why, back at Carrasahl he *killed* a man, he did—one of the court guards! And that’s not the worst of it! He killed him by ripping his throat out with his teeth! Was still chewing away at it when they caught him! Growling just like a wild animal worrying his prey!”

Seeing Kane’s obvious interest, the steward expanded. “So they locked him up, and it was all the baron could do to get him out of the city and up here. Lystric says it’s clearly possession, and he talked so clever that the baron packed him along with the rest of us in spite of their grudge.

“And I’ll tell you something else! A couple days ago just as the storm was hitting, one of the servants got his the same way exactly! Something tore his throat out! Babbled something right at the end about death coming out of the storm for all of us! It plain wasn’t natural, let me tell you! And I’ll tell you something else too! It may have been a wolf that caught him—but there’s some of us who wonder if old Lystric is telling it straight about Henderin being in his sight all the time!

“Listen, I could tell you about some other stuff going on around here of nights that don’t quite ring true! No Sir!”

But whatever other gossip the steward had to exhibit remained under wraps. A call from outside announced Troylin’s approach. The baron was impatient to get started. Swinging the hunting spear as he brooded over the steward’s disclosure, Kane hurried to the courtyard and mounted the horse his host had provided. The party, numbering over a dozen, rode out into the snow-clad forest.

Hounds raced through the snow baying joyously, within their shaggy coats oblivious to the subzero cold. Despite the crystalline coldness of the air and frozen ground, the distant sun shone through the clear sky and dazzled the hunters’ eyes. Even under the trees the bright reflection from the snow was significant; beyond the forest it was overwhelming.

Kane watched sharply for wolves, squinting his cold blue eyes against the glare, but he could see nothing of the great packs that had terrified the baron’s party the day before. Tracks were uncertain, since the snow drifted continually. Still the snow bore numerous signs that Kane recognized as marks made by the passage of forest beasts. The hounds growled from time to time as they encountered the spoor of wolves, and the huntsmen kept them in line with difficulty.

On the surface the group seemed a normal hunting party. Besides Kane, the baron had brought along the minstrel Evingolis and perhaps another ten of his hunters and men-at-arms. Shouts and the usual banter passed back and forth. If any man was concerned over the grim discoveries announced by Tali last night, he gave no indication. The thrill of the hunt and daylight had wiped aside such forebodings. All carried hunting spears save the huntsmen who tended the hounds, but except for long knives and a few bows no one carried exceptional weaponry other than Kane.

Kane rode with his heavy sword strapped to his saddle in easy reach. Evingolis had laughed at this. “We’re on a hunting party, wanderer, not a war party!”

Kane hadn’t cared for the albino’s jibe, but remembering that minstrels and jesters were expected to be

impertinent, he had only shrugged. “A man of my profession finds his sword a life long companion.”

“And a true colleague, no doubt!” Evingolis laughed. “I think it’s rather an extension of your brawny arm, and you can’t leave it behind. But your profession—what exactly is that?”

“Death,” answered Kane levelly. “But I make no charge for minstrels. There isn’t a coin small enough to accept as a fair payment, I find.”

The others were hugely amused at the byplay between guest and minstrel. But Kane and the albino did not join in the laughter.

The hounds began baying in earnest, drowning the casual exchanges of their masters. In excitement they strained against their leashes, dragging the handlers. “Fresh spoor!” was the shout. “Elk! Good big one from the tracks!”

“Turn them loose!” bellowed Baron Troylin. “Hot damn! Venison tonight for sure!”

Released, the hounds plummeted along the forest trail, hurtling fallen logs and plowing through drifts in their frantic haste. Exuberant howls tore the air and rang against the dark trees as they poured forth their eagerness to take their prey. Behind them galloped the hunters, no less eager than their dogs for the blood of the quarry. Shouting their own calls of encouragement they recklessly plunged after the pack—heedless of looming trees or hidden obstructions that threatened to bring horse and rider to a crashing fall.

“Come on! After them! We’ll miss the kill! Watch out, you bastard! A day’s wages the hounds finish him before we even get there! You’re on! Remember Kane gets first throw after the baron! Hurry! It’s a stag for sure! Damn you! Stump! Listen to them howl!” Perhaps the hounds were shouting much the same.

The headlong charge broke into a clearing and fell into sudden confusion. The trail had abruptly split, and the tracks plainly showed that the pack had left the clearing in two directions. “Thoem’s beard!” shouted Troylin in delight. “Look! There’s another one!”

From the evidence in the snow the first elk had come upon another here in the clearing. The second animal had bolted off on a different trail, and the pack had split apart to follow both spoors. “We’ll get them both!” cried Troylin. “Kane! Take after that one heading west! Bunch of you go with him! Hurry, damn it! The elk’ll kill the hounds with the pack split up!”

He plunged after what he judged to be the first elk. Kane and five of the baron’s men broke off and galloped after the newcomer. The forest quickly swallowed the sounds of their rushing passage, leaving the clearing strangely still—but not untenanted.

There was no presentiment of disaster. Kane’s quarry had been fresh and the hounds had already chased the other elk far. Thus the second stag had run far before the pack had been able to gain. However, the greater endurance of the dogs along with the lesser hindrance posed for them by the snow soon told, and with the pack hard on his heels the bull elk chose a small ravine to make his stand. Only three dogs had followed this second quarry, and they were unable to bring the great elk down. Around him they pranced, slashing at the giant, then darting back to avoid the deadly hooves and antlers. When the hunters came upon them, one hound had already been gored to death and the stag bled from a dozen tears in his mighty body. Kane cast his spear with fatal accuracy, hitting the elk in the neck. His throat transfixed, the forest monarch staggered, trumpeting in agony. The remaining hounds closed in for the kill,

as two more spears stabbed into the mortally wounded elk. Shouting in triumph the hunters surrounded the body of their prey, lying red in the snow; two hurriedly dismounted and ran to pull off the crazed hounds.

At which point the wolves attacked.

They fell on the hunters swiftly, silently as a striking serpent. A pack of perhaps fifteen huge, gray killers suddenly were on them, having come up unseen from the trees behind the hunters. One second the thrill and excitement of the kill; then a shriek of terrified agony and a ravine swarming with snarling shapes! They were the great gray wolves of the northern wastes—nearly six feet long and 150 pounds of slashing, yellow-eyed death. In a rage of blood lust they attacked the startled humans, and hunters now switched roles with prey.

The first to scream died almost instantly. A giant wolf had leapt upon him, hurtling him from his saddle and onto the snow. Choking the gaping fangs with an elbow, the hunter drew his knife and gutted the beast with a desperate stroke. Yet before the beast's hold had broken in death, a second gray killer slashed in and ripped open the man's throat.

The two hunters on the ground never had a chance. One lived long enough to wrest free a spear from the elk's carcass. He spitted the first wolf to meet him, but as he tried to pull the weapon loose, two more bore him to the frozen ground and tore him apart. The other was down before he could react. But he managed to get to his hunting knife, and beneath the gory huddle of gray shapes his arm plunged in and out—long after it seemed possible for life to remain. His efforts inflicted deep gashes in several of his slayers.

The hounds closed with the wolves with the unquenchable hatred of the tamed canine for his wild brother. At least one wolf rolled away from the snarling melee with his eyes glazed in death, and several others were flung back with crushed legs and gushing wounds. But numbers and wild ferocity overwhelmed the valiant struggle of the great hounds, and their fearless defiance ended in crimson ruin.

Kane had been among the first reached by the wolves' deadly ambush. Only his fantastic reflexes and blinding speed had saved him from their initial rush. Twisting in his saddle as the first beast had sought to leap upon him from behind, his powerful hands had locked in the wolf's ruff. Kane whirled the huge creature about and flung it from him; the wolf dashed against a tree close at hand and caromed into the snow with a broken back. In a flash Kane's mighty sword arm snatched the blade whistling from its scabbard. A second killer had followed almost on the heels of the first, but Kane's draw was faster and the keen blade sheared through the beast's skull. His horse reared in panic as the others closed in, and Kane had to clamp his legs to its flanks tightly to stay on. Another wolf went down, its skull smashed by the plunging hooves.

The other two hunters were able to hold out briefly against the swirling, gray shapes. One still retained his hunting spear. His cast caught the first wolf to reach him full in the chest. Had he not attempted to bring his bow into play, he might have lived awhile longer. As he struggled to notch an arrow he was hit from two sides at once. For a moment he tried to jam his bow down the throat of one attacker, held in the saddle by the opposing pulls of the wolves on either leg. He succeeded in breaking one wolf's grip, but before he could do more, the other dragged him to the ground. A gray nightmare closed over his writhing form, and the struggles abruptly ceased. The remaining hunter buried his knife in the ribs of one wolf which leaped to drag him down, but the flailing beast had fallen back with the blade wedged in its ribs. Weaponless, the rider sought flight. However, before his horse had covered half the distance of the ravine, it had been pulled down by the slashing fangs. Beast and rider collapsed in a squirming heap of gray and crimson, one wolf crushed beneath them.

And Kane was alone with the wolves.

Half a dozen gray killers circled their prey warily. Some were crippled and bleeding, but they showed no hint of abandoning the fast man. Their blood fury was completely aroused, and their savage minds were set on an unshakeable goal—to drag down the human and steep their muzzles in his blood. Kane glared back at them, lips drawn in a snarl and killer's eyes blazing with hellfire. His own insatiable lust to kill and to destroy burned incandescently within his spattered frame. For the space of several heartbeats killer looked upon killer.

Their attack was a gray blur of coordinated fury. Two wolves went for Kane, while the others attacked his steed. The wolf on his left Kane met with a blinding sword stroke that clove the beast's skull asunder. The other wolf arched through the air in a graceful, deadly leap that carried it into Kane's lap. Its fangs snapped shut spasmodically, but without aim—for its yellow eyes were already stark in death. A dagger had buried itself hilt-deep in its throat. Right-handed, Kane had thrown the weapon with unerring aim, just as the wolf had begun its leap. The wolf had died even as its fellow had fallen under Kane's sword.

The heavy carcass in his lap encumbered Kane for one deadly instant. Before he could toss it aside, another wolf buried its fangs in the horse's neck. Cursing, Kane broke free of the carcass; his sword flashed out and chopped through the wolf's neck. But the damage had been done, and with a shrill scream Kane's horse fell to the frozen ground.

Already Kane had vaulted clear of the saddle, and he landed catlike in the snow as his horse crashed to the earth in mortal agony. Only a split second get his balance, and the last three wolves were on him. He thrust out his sword; the wolf tried to twist aside and avoid the blade but was too slow. As the long blade transfixing it, another wolf leapt at Kane from the right, even as the third gathered its feet. No time to pull free his sword, Kane caught the wolf in full leap with his free hand. Swinging the beast by its foreleg, he hurled it aside and jerked his sword up. The third wolf had been injured and was just a little slow in joining its fellows' rush. Kane's rising blade caved in its side as the wolf leapt for the man's throat.

Meanwhile the second wolf had recovered its balance after landing harmlessly in the snow. Kane flashed around to meet this last adversary. The two last combatants in the death-filled ravine faced each other in deadly concentration. For an instant their two minds met in understanding, in mutual admiration of the other's sheer ferocity and awful capability. The wolf made a movement as if to turn and flee, then whirled and sprang for the man in one mighty leap of ripping fury. Kane's stroke almost missed the twisting gray blur. But not quite. And then only one living thing moved amidst the carnage.

Kane looked about him carefully, but no more wolves came into the ravine. He gulped air in great gasps and tried to remember how long the battle had lasted. Something like five minutes, he guessed—blood was streaming from the wounds of the elk yet.

He glanced at himself. By a miracle he was almost unscathed. Only a rip in his right arm where the last wolf's fangs had raked him in passing. His clothes and face were smeared with wolf blood, making him look like a crimson goblin. Quickly he retrieved and cleaned his weapons. He had to reach the others before any more wolves found him on foot. Assuming the rest of the party hadn't met a similar fate, he mused.

The entire attack seemed fantastic anyway. That the wolves had been drawn by the noise of the hunt and maddened by the kill would be a natural explanation. But unlikely. In the face of the other attacks especially. The incidents almost seemed like carefully planned campaigns. He pondered uneasily over what could inspire wolves to engage in systematic massacre of humans. The possibilities were not

encouraging.

A horse's whinny cut short his musing for the moment. In the trail ahead of him stood one of the horses which had bolted at the start of the attack. The animal was still quite frightened and eyed the man nervously. It wanted human companionship in this danger ridden frozen forest, but was still extremely spooky. Kane called the horse softly, soothingly—coaxing it close enough to reach. At least the wind was toward him—if the horse caught the scent of wolf blood, he'd turn and run for sure.

But the animal with agonizing slowness came close enough to let Kane catch its rein, after several heart-stopping attempts. He swung into the saddle and gave the skittish mount its head, galloping back along the trail over which many had passed a short time ago.

After a few miles Kane heard a distant scream—a terrified plea for help. He considered a moment and decided to check it out. The cry seemed human enough, and it was definitely feminine. Kane cautiously, nonetheless hastily, guided his mount toward the cry's source, curious to learn what number of throat produced it.

The horse caught a scent it remembered and whinnied in alarm. Kane tried to catch the scent too, but the reek of wolf on his body masked whatever it was. But from the horse's reluctance to proceed, Kane guessed it must be wolves the beast smelled. If there were wolves about, they were probably the cause of the girl's shouts. However, it seemed unlikely that the girl would still be alive to scream—which argued for an inhuman source of the disturbance. Kane was familiar with instances of would-be rescuers having been lured to their doom by following unseen cries for aid, and in view of his recent fight he felt inclined to caution.

Yet the screams sounded familiar, and acting on a hunch Kane spurred his reluctant mount forward.

Two wolves were snarling around the trunk of a large, low-hanging fir. Perched on a branch was the center of their attention—Breenanin.

Kane drew his blade, shouted and charged the lurking wolves. They gave a last glare at the treed human and broke for cover from the newcomer.

He halted under the tree and helped her from the branches; she landed in a sobbing heap in his arms. Kane tried to get a few questions in, but Breenanin only clung to him and whimpered. So he made what he hoped might sound like soothing, sympathetic sounds, and let her run down.

He had almost reached the clearing where the second elk had been come upon, when his charge stopped long enough to sniffle. "Ugh! You're a mess! Did you take a bath in elk's blood or something?"

"Or something. What in the name of the Seven Nameless were you doing out here? I seem to recall leaving you at the castle this morning."

"I wanted to go on the hunt, and Father wouldn't let me because of the stuff about the wolves. Only I had to get out and see what the woods looked like after the storm, so I saddled my own horse and rode after you. The porter let me out because I've got the goods on him and anyway I said I was just going to ride around the walls. Except I rode on after you and I thought I could catch up and Father would be too interested in the hunt to send me back since I was along anyway.

"But all of a sudden this pack of wolves came after me. I knew I couldn't outrun them in the forest, so when my horse ran under that low tree back there, I slowed him enough to grab a branch and scramble

off.” She sniffled. “I thought my arms would pull out, but I knew I had to hang on. One of them nearly grabbed my leg before I could climb clear of them. But most of them kept chasing the horse—I guess they got him, but I didn’t see—and just the two stayed to wait for me to come down. So I shouted and yelled hoping someone would come by from the hunt and hear me. And that’s what you did,” she concluded.

Kane was amazed at the girl’s coolness. Most women would have been too panic stricken, too stupid, too weak. Yet Breenanin had survived and seemingly was relatively calm once again. It was unbelievable.

He rode into the clearing and saw with relief that Troylin and his party were waiting there. Intact and complete with elk. They shouted an exuberant greeting, then fell into mystified silence at the bloody rider along with his prize.

“Kane! What the hell!” gasped Troylin in amazement.

“Here’s your daughter—safe enough,” Kane said. “The rest are back with the elk. They won’t be following us.”

V. Tales on a Winter Evening

The hunting banquet was a rather dismal affair. These chases often had their fill of danger, and casualties of the hunt were frequently toasted to *in memoriam*. But five corpses were too many. Men drank their ale too seriously for fun, and in place of the usual raucous horseplay small groups spoke of the weird attack in quiet, anxious tones. The behavior of the wolves was decidedly unnatural, and not a few old legends were retold in the gloomy shadows of the dining hall.

At the high table the diners were in a no more festive mood. Breenanin was still shaken from her experience and did not pursue her accustomed banter with her father. The baron had been so thankful for her safety, that he had forgotten to punish her. Henderin’s place was empty, and his two wardens were absent as well. The crazed youth had slipped away from his keepers that day and eluded them for several hours of frantic searching, before he was recaptured scrambling over the outer wall. He had been violent, and Lystric had been forced to place him under restraint until the spell passed. Lystric himself was no different from usual. The long-bearded astrologer sullenly gobbled his meal, while favoring the others with a baleful look.

Baron Troylin had just listened to Kane’s retelling of the massacre in the ravine. He had asked him to repeat it three times now, and each time he had shaken his head at the conclusion and made the same comments about the uncanny behavior of the wolves. He was trying to fix the details in his thick head, in the vague hope that somewhere in Kane’s narrative would lie the explanation for it all.

He caught sight of Evingolis, who was sitting in the shadows as usual, watching the diners while he

gnawed a rib of venison. “Minstrel!” he rumbled. “This place has less life than a wake. Let’s have some music to liven things a little.” A raucous cheer went up from the diners in anticipation.

The albino strolled from his perch and collected his lute. Playing over the strings a moment, he raised mocking eyes to Kane and announced, “Here’s a tune perhaps our guest will recognize.”

His clear voice began the song, and Kane barely repressed a start. The minstrel’s song was in archaic Ashertiri—a tongue Kane doubted if another man within days of travel could understand! The song was the work of the long dead and ill famed poet Clem Ginech of ancient Ashertiri, whose efforts had left those of his age uncertain whether he was a poet turned sorcerer or the reverse.

Within an endless mirror of my spirit’s infinite soul,
I reach back into timeless ages beginning or unbegan ;
And see a crystal pattern, fluctuating panorama,
Forgotten by the gods, but unveiled to inward sight.

“Let’s have something in Carrasahli!” roared a drunken soldier.

An insane elder god, in his madness sought to build,
A race of mortal creatures in the image of divine.
In foolish egomania, fatal folly, the artist had conspired
Within this mortal image godlike perfection to contain;
Blindly had forgotten that an image so conceived,
Must embody the very madness of its deluded parent.
Great cataclysmic toil, cyclopean effort, did he make;
To the taunting laughter of his fellows, amused to see a fool,
He cluttered all the earth with his blighted handiwork,
And rested in smug content with his idiot labor.

Several louts began to beat on the table in protest to the eerie, unintelligible song.

In time this fool's creation multiplied all through the land,
And disgusted those before them with their drivel,
Content to live a wormlike existence for the pleasure of their god,
Who in his mindless conceit only giggled with his dolls.
Yet in one there rose rebellion with this crawling in cosmic dung—
No maggot hot a serpent was this son of divinity's folly.
And in his hellish fury at the crooning lies of that creator,
He chose to be his own master and defied this nameless god,
And with his hands he slew his brother—choicest plaything.
Now despair racked the broken mind of this insane elder god,
For he saw the flaws within his cherished children
And recognized himself as the author of that image.
This rebel he cursed in rage to bleak, eternal wandering,
And gave him eyes of a killer, so all know the Mark of Kane.

"Damn your pale hide, minstrel!" bellowed the drunken soldier. "I said give us something we all know!" He lurched to his feet and stumbled over to Evingolis, interrupting the ancient song. "Now let's hear something else!" He tossed his mug of ale in the minstrel's face and roared with laughter. His fellows joined in.

In Evingolis's face there flashed a look of white, hot anger. He laid the lute aside and wiped his burning eyes. Then with a movement too swift to follow, his hand lashed out and struck the soldier's laughing face. As if kicked by a horse the drunkard shot backwards onto the stone floor. He did not get up. Shocked silence caught the audience; they had considered the lean albino a weakling.

"Sonofabitch!" gasped Troylin in awe. "Shows you not to pick a fight if you can't hold your brew! Must have hit the floor on his head or something. Somebody get him out of here."

Sneering at the startled crowd, Evingolis picked up his lute and stalked out of the hall.

"Just as well!" the baron observed. "He's going to goad those guys a little too far with his superior airs one of these days—they won't stand for it in a minstrel. May not get off a lucky punch next time." He chuckled. "Quite a character, isn't he though? Sure can sing the strangest stuff I've ever heard. Make any sense of that one, Kane?"

Kane looked after the departing minstrel in calculation. “Some little,” he murmured, and fell to brooding. His eyes looked into the dancing flames, and none could say what he saw there.

VI. A Man Not Man

It crouched in the shadow of the wall, watching the sleeping manor in silent hatred. The cold wind ruffled its white coat, and its panting breath raised small puffs of steam. Yet the creature felt not the cold, only conscious of a burning hunger that shrieked to be satiated. With its inhuman sight it regarded the quiet out-building which housed the baron’s off duty men-at-arms; in the darkness all objects stood clearly in varying shades of light tan and brown. Within that lodge there would be soft human bodies—hairless weakling ape creatures now sleeping without care. Their tender flesh would be warm with seething blood. The creature trembled in unspeakable anticipation, lips drawn back over champing fangs.

From the nighted forest, dark shapes were loping across the snow and silently gathering outside the gate of the enclosure. The creature felt their presence with its mind and welcomed them. Many of its brothers had answered its voiceless call. They too sensed the many hated man creatures inside the castle walls, and their feral minds rejoiced in the scenes of slaughter drawn for them by their leader.

More than thirty lean, gray forms now were waiting beyond the gate. It was enough, decided the creature. Once more its mind reached out to its brothers, impressing upon them the plan they must follow. No opposition was encountered. This was the wolf leader; they must obey his summons, must carry through his commands. It had been this way since before man first dropped from the trees and challenged the Brotherhood with his puny clubs and stores.

The creature unlocked the gate and effortlessly swung it half open. Into the courtyard the hungry wolves filed, slipping along the shadows until they reached the lodge. Behind this door slept the detested humans, wrapped in their stolen furs and besotted with burned flesh and rotted plant juices. The leader silently stole to the door, knowing it was kept unbolted so that late revelers might stagger in. Another wave of awful burger shook through it. Now!

Its fearfully taloned hand gripped the latch. Its red eyes shone with blood lust, and an inhuman grin of triumph exposed the gleaming rows of fangs arming its sloping muzzle. The creature threw open the door and sprang within! On its heels poured the snarling pack!

The soldiers awoke from their dreams to find a nightmare of ripping fangs and flailing bodies. The creature howled its victory—over a dozen men for the slaughter! Out of the blackness the pack sprang upon the helpless sleepers. Gray forms struggled over the writhing victims, snarling and tearing into the warm flesh. Screams of death agony—of utmost horror—filled the lodge and overflowed into the night, mingling with the hideous triumph of the feasting wolves.

The screams were stilled.

Now! snarled the leader in command. Now, go! Before the others can come! More of this will follow for us! But now, go! The wolves were loath to abandon their twitching prey. It was asking much to go. But the leader must be obeyed. Reluctantly the pack released their booty and pointed their gray muzzles to the outside.

Several humans greeted them in the courtyard—the hopeless shrieks of the dying had aroused the castle. Now the humans stopped in terror to see the crimson-splashed pack pour from the lodge behind their leader.

It was silhouetted there in the pale moonlight—a ghastly hybrid of man and wolf. Covered with white fur it was, and taller than the average human whose shape it borrowed. Cruel claws ended its toes and fingers; its arms long and legs strangely set. Atop its great shoulders was set a demon's visage—a furry head with high pointed ears and a long jaw more wolf-like than human. Its sharp tusks dripped red in the moonlight. And its bestial eyes gleamed an evil crimson with blasphemous hatred of mankind.

The soldiers drew their weapons in desperation. But they were only four, and the wolves simply overran them—bearing their victims to the earth and slashing them to tatters. A few wolves fell before the humans died. The creature threw itself in fury upon one soldier whose blade had smashed through a gray murderer. Knocking away the human's weapon, the creature pulled him to its chest in an awful hug. Ribs and vertebrae snapped, as razor fangs buried in the unprotected throat. Then the leader tossed the husk aside and raced through the gate with the pack, as now more men with torches and weapons emerged from the castle. They vanished into the forest.

A scene of hideous carnage greeted the belated rescue party. Those who entered the fatal lodge recoiled in horror at the sight of the slashed and mutilated carcasses of their comrades. In the trampled courtyard, one man yet lived.

“Wolves!” he gasped out with his final breaths. “Dozens of them! It led them in here! A demon! A werewolf! Let them in so they could murder us all! A werewolf!” He died screaming shrilly of dripping fangs.

Kane considered the man's disclosure. He had just gotten to the scene and had not seen the retreating attackers. Questioning of the men revealed that no one had had any more than a fleeting glimpse as the wolves slipped into the forest. The servants and soldiers who had slept within the dining hall had been first to the scene, and none of them could give an intelligent story of what little they had witnessed.

In a frightened group they dared to go beyond the gate. The tracks of many wolves could be seen in the torchlight. Other tracks were present as well—a single set of almost human footprints. But no bare human foot had made them, for the steps were oddly contorted and the marks of talons reached deeply into the snow.

The worst part was when they dared to follow these uncanny tracks. For the trail of the werewolf led only part way to the woods. Then it curved around and headed back to the castle, to a point along the wall on the far side of the courtyard. Here the tracks indicated that the creature had vaulted the high wall, and on the other side the snow was too trampled to say where he had gone. But it was all too clear that the werewolf had not left the courtyard again.

“May all the gods have mercy on us!” cried someone. “One of us is a demon!”

VII. “One of us...”

“Not counting the women, that leaves our strength at about thirty,” was Troylin’s gloomy conclusion. “And out of this number, one of us is a werewolf,” he pronounced, looking over the grim assemblage. It was noon of the following day. A careful search since dawn had failed to turn up any trace of the creature. Since no one had left the enclosure, the werewolf had to be still within. The castle was small—really no more than a fortified manor. A systematic search, check and recheck, of every conceivable hiding place had been carried out. It was plain then that the demonic leader of last night’s attack was not present in the form described by the dying soldier and only faintly glimpsed by those first on the scene. Only one conclusion was possible. The creature was a werewolf—a demon capable of assuming human form to mingle with unsuspecting mankind. As it now was doing.

“There are several types of creatures generally referred to as ‘werewolves’,” explained Lystric. “One type is a human who for some reason can alter his shape into that of a wolf or semilupine hybrid. In other cases, some malevolent demon, ghost or other spirit will assume such a form—although this is merely one choice of many physical manifestations within its power.” He warmed to his lecture. “Yet another type occurs when a wolf is able to assume human form. This monster is usually called the ‘wolf leader’ and is by far the most dangerous. While the other types represent basically solitary habits, the wolf leader is able to coordinate the action of many wolves in order to carry out its fiendish goals—usually wholesale slaughter of mankind. Of course, there are many finer shades and distinctions. Not to mention those harmless individuals who through some mental disorder imagine themselves to be wild beasts.”

“Meaning your charge Henderin, no doubt!” snapped Tali. “Sorry, graybeard, but we’re not buying your burst of fine talk and lecturing! We all know that madman’s no harmless nut—we know about that poor bastard he killed in Carrasah! Same as these other guys here! ‘Demonic possession’ I believe you said it was then.

“Well we think this thing has gone far enough! You’ve had your chance to exorcise the devil! All you’ve done is loaf around and use Henderin to get free meals! Well by Thoem, we’ve had enough stalling, and now there’s going to be some action!”

“Just what do you mean by that?” thundered the baron, pounding on the table. “Just what sort of ‘action’ do you have in mind against my son!”

Tali retreated a bit, then supported by the opinion of his fellows, he began less belligerently, “Now, milord we all understand how much the boy means to you. And the bunch of us has been loyal to you throughout. There was plenty who said we’d regret ever coming up to this godforsaken place with a madman along. But damn it all, we’re not about to sit here and be slaughtered in our beds just because your son is too highclass to burn for his crimes!” His fellow retainers murmured assent.

“May I remind you,” Troylin hissed, “that murder of an aristocrat—no matter how insane—by a commoner carries a sure penalty of crucifixion! And I assure you that anyone who tries to lay a hand on my boy I’ll cut down myself!”

The crowd was getting dangerous. Tali retorted, “Well then, there’s some of us who’ll run that risk if we have to—better than taking our chances being snowbound with a wolfpack at the walls and a werewolf in our midst! And there’s no punishment when there’s no witnesses!” he added significantly.

“What are we doing!” Breenanin shouted over the ugly growls of the crowd. “You stand there talking about murdering someone who’s never given any of you a just cause to complain! A month ago you would have died for Baron Troylin! Time and again I’ve heard you congratulate yourselves on being in

the service of one of the most generous and easy going gentry in the land! And now because you're suddenly frightened, you talk of killing his only son—whom all of you thought was a great guy before his sickness! You even talk of massacring all of us! I'd prefer letting the wolves in—they'd show more gratitude! You don't even know if Henderin had anything to do with these murders!"

The two factions glared at one another uncertainly. They were ordinary folk, a country baron and a lot of provincial retainers from a backwater kingdom. Murder and mutiny were foreign to their rustic background, but terror of the unknown and the presence of hideous death brutalized them all. The retainers must regain their accustomed security at any price; Troylin would fight to the death to preserve his son.

Kane had carefully avoided identification with either side. It was not his fight and as always his only loyalty was to himself. He needed the baron's hospitality until the way south was open. After that he cared less how they resolved the dispute. Still as long as he was here and a werewolf was haunting all in the castle, he was an interested party. And at present he did not want to get involved in mutiny—especially since strangers made bad risks as witnesses.

Tali persisted. "Well, if Henderin isn't the werewolf, there's sure a lot of evidence against him! First, we know he killed that guard like he was a wild animal, and we all know he's crazy. All the time asking for raw meat and howling nights and going berserk! Second, when the hunting party was attacked yesterday, Henderin was running around loose. Caught him coming back from the forest. Mighty strange wolves attacking armed men on horseback, while an unarmed man on foot runs around unharmed. Like he didn't need to fear them—like he was out there telling them to kill us! Ok—where is Henderin when these other attacks happen? Poor Bete gets his in the storm, bunch of travelers get theirs too—and the thing last night in the soldiers' quarters! And Henderin—oh, he's safely locked up! So we're promised. Only thing is—we've just got Lystric's word for that! And I for one don't care to believe everything that scheming old fossil has to say!"

Lystric snarled a stream of curses, and the affair came close to blows. Kane saw his chance.

"That's a most interesting point you've made." The baron eyed him in disgust, but he went on. "Let's talk about Lystric for a moment. I understand he was just a fifth-rate back of a wizard with a smattering of occult knowledge—unable to make a go of it, until suddenly he gets this job. Sort of suspicious, don't you think? A perfectly normal, likable guy begins to act like a wolf, and this cunning old fakir announces he knows how to cure him. Nice soft position for him—but only as long as Henderin stays mad. And I understand about all Lystric's idea of treatment consists of is letting Henderin run around until he snaps out of it. Interesting way to treat demonic possession. Put it all together and it sort of sounds like Lystric has made a plush position for himself. There are several strange drugs and countless spells that can make a normal man begin to act like a wolf."

Lystric was shrieking protestations and curses by this point, too enraged to make a rebuttal. The others were listening intently.

"So Lystric thinks he's all set," continued Kane. "Once in a while Henderin gets away from him and stirs up some mischief, so the old vulture finds it necessary to claim he was under lock and key all the time. Or take it a step further. Maybe he's mad himself, and he's using Henderin as a tool to destroy us. I understand he and the baron have no cause to love one another. Magicians have curious ways of settling grudges.

"And for that matter, Lystric just might be a werewolf himself. Not the first time a sorcerer lost his humanity by meddling in the black arts. With Henderin as camouflage, it would be a perfect set up to

wipe us all out while we chased the wrong fox.”

“So what do you suggest we do?” asked Tali, no longer as sure of himself.

“Remain calm. My point is we don’t know that Henderin is really a werewolf, and Lystric has some mighty questionable connections himself with all this. So we place a guard on them both. Henderin is locked up—we just need to make sure he stays that way. At the same time put several men to watch Lystric. That way they’re both harmless—and no one gets hurt. If they’re innocent, we’ll let them go. And since they’re under surveillance, we’re safe from them. No rebellion, no useless fighting. We might even see a sudden improvement in Henderin’s condition.”

He paused. About him his listeners were showing signs of assent. Here was a reasonable solution that both factions could accept.

“Sounds good,” concluded Tali, who seemed to act as spokesman. “We’ll do it then. Forgive us, milord, for our threats. Of course none of us mean any harm to you or to Henderin—if he’s innocent. It’s just this whole business has gotten the lot of us unhinged. We’re all in a bad fix here, and not knowing whether the man next to you is a friend or a monster... We just lost our heads.”

“I understand,” assented the baron, his temper still aroused but somewhat suppressed. “Let this be the end of this nonsense and I’ll let matters pass. Sure we’ll put a guard on Lystric and my son—and we’ll watch them. But there’ll be no harm to Henderin while I’m master here!”

“All right!” Lystric hissed, forcing himself to speak slowly. “I’ve listened to all this stupidity as long as I can stand it. I’ve heard myself insulted, my motives misinterpreted, my methods criticized—and by a batch of ignorant slobs. I’ve been accused of all manner of nameless crimes and schemes. Now I’m to be put under guard. All right! Go ahead! Obviously I can’t stop you blundering, cowardly fools from your idiotic vigilantism! So lock me up then!

“But I promise you you’re barking up the wrong tree. Time will prove I’m innocent as well as my charge. And while you’re guarding me the real werewolf—assuming it’s not just the product of your terrified delusions—will be running around with impunity! And don’t forget I’m better suited to protect you from it than anyone else among you. Who else has any training or understanding of the necromantic arts? Given time, I tell you, I can discover means to ferret out this creature in your ranks—to seek him out and destroy the beast! Didn’t I earlier warn you all of the danger I had foreseen in the stars! And no one listened. Fools! Ungrateful scum the lot of you!” The astrologer’s manner was not designed to win him sympathy.

“And now let me tell you something for a charge. I’ve done some thinking on my own, and I’ve got some of my own suspicions! Does that surprise you? Sure! He’s a scheming old charlatan, you say. Bah! What do ignorant buffoons like you know of true genius! Peasants who measure ability by material wealth! I tell you, my talents are so far beyond your mundane groveling imaginations that I waste my breath even trying to help you!

“But listen! Think on this while you smugly pass judgment upon your betters. When did all this start? When this man called Kane came riding up to our door out of the storm, that’s when! And just what do you know of him? A wandering mercenary, he tells you. And you believe! Well I’m not an ignorant backwoods plowhand, and I know something of what goes on in the rest of the world!

“And there are plenty of legends and rumors and wild stories that I’ve encountered about a man called Kane. And none of them speaks well for him! At best he’s a treacherous, murderous rogue who’s

figured in more plots and dark schemes than Lord Thoem and his demons ever dreamed of! And at worst the legends hint he's some sort of immortal cursed by the gods to wander the earth and bring havoc wherever he stops!"

About time to put a stop to this, Kane realized. "Ok, old man! You've had your chance to clear yourself! All you've done is insult good people and brag about your own dubious abilities! As for these dark legends and nonsense, I don't suppose you can produce any of it either. Sorry, graybeard, but the old divide and conquer ruse is a lot older even than you—and these people are too smart to be sucked in by your desperate ravings! How about it, Tali? Heard enough from him?"

"Plenty!" came the hot reply. "Come on, fellows! We'll take this old viper up to his lair and see he stays put. He can batter Henderin's ears with his garbage!"

Spluttering still, but trying to look dignified through it all, Lystric let himself be borne away to the wing of the castle where he and his charge were quartered.

The tension in the room was eased. The enemy within was dealt with to the apparent satisfaction of most. It was daylight, and plans could be made for the night to come. Guards would be posted. Doors locked. Weapons kept at hand. The bulk of the survivors departed on their own business.

"Thanks for what you did," Baron Troylin told Kane awkwardly. "For a moment I thought you'd thrown in with them. Now I see you were just leading them along, stalling for time."

"I'd hoped you wouldn't think me so ungrateful for your hospitality. But it was the best way to manipulate them."

"You seem pretty adept at that sort of thing," returned his host. "Seems there's a lot of talents you possess that speak for more than a common mercenary."

"I never said I was a common mercenary, though," said Kane with assumed levity.

Troylin discreetly let matters drop. Nonetheless he found himself pondering the astrologer's accusations. The name of Kane was not unfamiliar to him, now that he strained his memory. Of course, political matters other than those of Carrasahl were only obscure if interesting gossip to his way of thinking. He was a simple man, and his chief concerns were usually connected with filling the hours between waking and sleep with as much enjoyable activity as possible.

But now that he thought about it, hadn't there been a general named Kane connected with that ugly business down in Shapeli? And Kane wasn't exactly a common name. Certainly, he really did know nothing at all about his mysterious guest. He began to speculate about this red-haired stranger with the uncanny eyes.

VIII. One by One

The hour was getting on toward midnight. Most of the castle's inhabitants had sought their beds for what sleep their nerves would allow them. All were not asleep, however. Several men stood guard outside the chambers of Lystric the astrologer. These were in the northwest wing of the castle—a tower set apart from the more frequented hallways. This was convenient for both occupants: Lystric could pursue his studies in quiet, with a good view of the stars from the tower's summit, while Henderin could rave and howl as he saw fit without disturbing the others. The open area on top of the tower was used by Lystric. Immediately below this was the chamber wherein Henderin was confined; its one window was barred and overlooked a seventy-five foot drop to the courtyard, and the door which opened onto the tower stairs was thick and heavily locked. Below this was another room given over to Lystric's studies and filled with a clutter of sorcerous paraphernalia. Still below, at the base of the tower where it adjoined the main body of the castle, was the room in which Lystric slept. This chamber had two doors: one to the tower stairs which was locked, and the other which opened into the hallway at that end of the castle. This latter door was now bolted from the outside, and five armed men stood guard beside it, keeping close watch over the sleeping astrologer. No one could enter or leave the tower chambers except through that door.

A few others were still awake in the great hall. A fire was burning lustily, and those who did not feel like sleep sought its companionship. It had been agreed that for some men to stay awake through the night was an obvious precaution, as well as having guards patrol the hallways in pairs. More would have been better, but the castle's strength had been dangerously cut by the previous attacks.

So Kane sat awake beside the fire, sipping larger quantities of ale than seemed wise and moodily listening to the minstrel. The albino sat in the shadow of the beams as usual, evoking strange melodies from his lute and from time to time singing along to these rare works of departed genius. He was an unusual man, Kane mused, his performance and repertoire displaying fantastic sensitivity and skill. He wondered what made Evingolis content to attach himself to a country bumpkin like Troylin—perhaps something in the minstrel's past had barred from him the richer, more appreciative patrons of the southern nations.

Scent of delicate perfume and sparkle of pale gold hair in the warm glow. Breenanin sat down beside him in the hearth light. Kane remembered her face as it had first formed in his vision. Only a few days before was it that he had come so close to frozen death in the storm. Time had no meaning to Kane. A dozen years or as many minutes—once past both fitted into the same span of memory. Either a century ago or just that morning he had fled across the northern wastes—and for how long? It was nothing, for it was past and beyond him. His life was only a minute focus of time, an instant of the present balanced between centuries of past and an unknown duration of future existence. He felt a moment of vertigo, as his mind hung poised over time's chasm.

"I couldn't sleep with all this on my mind, so I came down to the fire where it would be cozier," she told him, feeling it necessary that she offer some reason for her presence beside him.

Kane stirred. "It's a haunted night. There's a certain tenseness in the air as before a battle. Death hovers near, and man is reluctant to sleep because he knows an eternal sleep may be his fate within a few hours more.

"Some ale to soothe your thoughts perhaps?" She nodded and Kane rose to pour a cup.

She accepted it with a slight smile, uncertain of her feelings toward the other. He was so strange—huge and brutal, every inch a machine of destruction, she sensed. Yet he was civil of speech and manner—and far more erudite than any man of her experience, other than those learned fossils and simpering dandies

of the court. There were many contradictions embodied in the big stranger, nor could she hazard a guess to his nationality or even his age. He seemed so inhumanly aloof and alone. He gave her the same sort of eerie thrill that some of Evingolis's strange songs created.

"You never say another person's name when you speak to him," she commented.

Kane favored her with one of his uncanny, penetrating stares. "No," he admitted. "I don't suppose I do."

"Breenanin," she prompted softly.

"Breenanin."

In silence they shared the fire and the minstrel's song.

I saw her in winter's silent cold light

Clearly, with her warmth upon the sparkle

Of that magical, crystalline night.

And love I knew unspoken passed,

Its timeless warmth, one frozen instant,

Eternally encased in infinite amber.

But what I sensed I could not return;

The instant vanished in that crystalline storm.

In vain do I call through this dancing myriad

Of relinquished emotions, frozen fragments of time.

For the moment has passed, now lost in that swirl—

Splintered shards of time's reflection—

Reflections for the winter of my soul.

The minstrel's voice echoed into silence; his fingers stilled the strings of his lute. Quietly he left the hall to the two seated before the fire. In the far corner of the room, a few half-asleep servants rolled dice.

"Where'd you get him?" broke in Kane.

Breenanin shifted in her chair. The minstrel's song had lulled her into an almost trance-like state. "He

came to us last summer. Came up from the southlands, I suppose—he never said anything about his past. Sort of wandered about the court in Carrasahl for a while, then attached himself to Father’s patronage. We were glad to get him—others offered him more money than we could. He talks occasionally of some far away places he’s been, and most of his songs no one can understand. Guess he’s just wandering about the world as his fancy suits him.

“Must be nice to go somewhere new. In Carrasahl we don’t get to travel much. Can’t handle an estate from somewhere far off, Father always says, and travel’s dangerous for anyone to risk. Once we went to Enseljos to see Winston’s coronation, though.”

They talked of various matters for a while—long periods of mutual silence between their spots of conversation. At length Kane looked over and saw that she slept. He was reluctant to disturb her, but at the same time he knew she should not be left alone in the great hall with death abroad in the night. So he lifted her in his arms and carried her up the wide stairs to her room on the balcony across that end of the hall.

She stirred in her sleep, but did not awaken. A half-smile was on her thin lips, and her fine teeth were white against her pale skin. She was soft and warm in her fur robe. Kane felt an emotion stir within him as he carried her that he had not experienced in long years. It might have been love, but then he could not remember.

Returning to the hall, he sat before the fire again. But the spell had been broken. Now he felt strangely restless, sick of brooding over dead memories in the firelight. After another cup of ale, Kane arose, fastened on his sword, and announced to the few remaining servants that he would walk around to see how things went with the others.

The hallways were long and dark, their silence only faintly broken by Kane’s soft tread. He walked the cold stones slowly, hand near swordhilt and keen eyes searching every shadow. There was an almost tangible aura of fear abroad in the torchlit corridors, and death crouched invisibly in each spot of darkness. The spirits of those horribly murdered danced about him, laughing and gibbering in his ears, pointing derisive fingers at the lone man who in his conceit thought to avert their hideous fate. The numbing cold of the winter soaked through the stones along with the blackness of its night. The feeble torches were useless in dispelling either its cold or its gloom.

Faint winds from nowhere, damp ghost breath, played upon the hairs of Kane’s neck. Sudden scurrying sounds haunted his steps, causing him to whirl about and stare along the corridor through which he had just passed—then reel about once more as the wraith-like movements teased him. There was nothing to be seen. Even when Kane stopped long minutes to listen, or walked back again over the same stones. Nothing even for his eyes to discover. He realized his nerves were getting the better of him, and fought to control himself—for he knew he must not become dull and insensitive on this haunted night. Because sometime a shadow might hold a less intangible menace.

He stopped suddenly, looking everywhere about him with painful concentration. Then he bent over quickly and touched a finger to the spot, knowing even as he did it that the smear was fresh blood. He strained his eyes against the uneven torchlight. Normal vision would perhaps have missed it, but Kane could see the faint trickle of blood trailing along the stones. Sword in hand, he followed the shining path—every sense strained to alert him of ambush.

The trail halted before the door of an unused bedchamber. Kane remembered checking through the chamber during the morning search. They had found nothing, and had left the door securely locked. Now the door was still closed, but unlocked. A smear of blood marked the jamb.

Kane considered only a moment. He could bring more men, but the creature, if inside, could then escape and mingle with those who came to assist him. He could shout for aid, but that would take awhile to arrive, and the werewolf would be alerted of his presence. A sudden attack seemed best. Kane had considerable confidence in the deadliness of his mighty sword arm.

He kicked the door open and lunged into the room, swirling his sword in a shining arc of death.

He whirled once quickly, saw nothing to attack immediately, then jumped back with the wall to his back and carefully examined the room. The werewolf was nowhere to be seen among the slightly dusty furnishings. But it had been there. At least it was unlikely that the four corpses had entered the room on their own.

They were the broken bodies of four of the guards who were supposed to patrol the hallways. They were freshly killed—still warm, Kane discovered. Of three the necks had been broken; the fourth had his throat torn out. A crude attempt had been made to sop up the blood, but enough had trickled through to leave a trail to the room. The creature was cunning, Kane realized. It had silently killed these guards—probably leaping upon them from behind after they passed the door. It had tried to kill them bloodlessly so as not to give evidence of their fate. Evidently on one the werewolf had been forced to use its fangs, and it had not been able to stop the telltale bleeding completely.

The question now was what to do. How did the werewolf's presence here relate to Lystric and Henderin? Kane decided to check this out. He was close to that wing of the castle anyway, and those guards would be his nearest source of help. He would investigate the situation at that end, and if clear summon their aid to hunt down the werewolf before it realized its presence had been detected.

Warily, as fast as he dared, Kane rushed to the tower chambers. The five guards still sat in front of the door. At least they had not been overpowered, he thought with relief.

The first thing that struck him was that he had not been challenged. They couldn't all be asleep, surely!

They were not. They were all quite dead. There was not a single mark on any body—at least that a cursory check could disclose. They sat or sprawled about the door in vaguely lifelike attitudes—probably arranged that way, Kane decided. An empty ale pitcher lay beside one of them, and Kane sniffed it cautiously. There was no scent of poison that he could distinguish, but there were many that bore no taint. Poison seemed the only logical answer to these five silent, unmarked deaths.

Still determined to see it through, Kane stepped to the door. It was unlocked, as he had expected. A peephole was agape through which the guards had watched the interior. Looking through, Kane could see nothing lurking within.

He once more kicked in the door and hurled himself into the room, following his earlier procedure. Nothing moved. Lystric was in one corner, half under a table.

Kane examined the astrologer. Whatever his schemes or abilities, he would exercise them no more. Lystric's head was all but torn from his body, and hungry fangs had ripped away most of the soft flesh of his arms and legs. The werewolf had not been able to contain its unspeakable appetite all night.

Nerves prickling, Kane slowly rose from the mangled ruin of a man. Perhaps the answer would lie in Henderin's chamber upstairs. Sword ready for instant action, he tiptoed to the door leading to the tower stairs. The door was still locked, whatever that might portend. Kane carefully manipulated the bolt.

A sudden scratch of claws on stone warned him! Kane jumped from his attention to the bolt, whipping around with blade swishing!

The werewolf glared at him balefully, its bloody tusks gnashing hideously! A low snarl rumbled in the creature's throat. Taller than Kane it stood, and under its white fur rippled bands of steel-like muscle.

Before Kane had a chance to do more than recognize the beast's awful presence, it sprang for him! Putting all his tremendous strength behind his stroke, Kane smashed his blade full against the lunging werewolf!

Had his attacker been a man, the blade would have sundered him to the waist. But from the werewolf's shoulder the sword bounded back as if it had struck slightly resilient iron! The sound was a dull thunk, and no other evidence was there that the blow had landed—the werewolf's spring was not even slackened! Yet Kane's arm ached to the marrow with the force of the resounding blow, and his sword bounded from numb fingers!

In a split second the creature was on him, fangs slavering, fetid breath in his face and taloned hands clutching for his throat! Kane had no chance to dodge! The snarling force of the creature's lunge smashed him onto the floor! His head cracked against the stones, and consciousness mercifully left him, as those burning eyes bored into his mind!

Sometime later he regained consciousness. Kane rolled to his knees weakly. His head was in agony and his mouth was full of blood. Then with a start he realized two things. One, that for some reason he was still alive. And secondly, he was no longer by the tower stairs, but lying beside Lystric's corpse. In disgust he recognized that the blood in his mouth was not his own!

He spat in revulsion and groggily stood up, staggering to the doorway.

“Don't move another step! I'll skewer you for sure!”

Kane saw, with sudden awareness of his situation, that Evingolis was standing in the doorway—a crossbow aimed at the other's heart.

Running feet and shouts sounded from the hallway.

“Well, Kane,” said the minstrel in awe, “you played it cleverly. I'll admit I never thought you'd be the werewolf!”

IX. Impasse

The surprising thing was that they had not killed him immediately. Kane's fast tongue was some help in postponing matters, but he suspected Breenanin had been more effective. The baron had not completely forgotten that Kane had rescued his daughter from almost certain death.

Evingolis had spelled it out, point by point. The first death had occurred right before Kane had ridden out the storm. A search after the storm had disclosed the mutilated remains of another band of travelers—abroad in the blizzard with Kane. During the hunt it had been Kane’s party that the wolves had attacked, and only Kane had been witness—himself miraculously unscathed. And when the werewolf and its pack murdered the soldiers in their lodge, Kane had not come upon the scene until late. Finally, this last attack had come while Kane had prowled the hallways alone. And when Evingolis had discovered him, he was crouched beside the torn body of the old astrologer—a man who had claimed to have damning knowledge of this mysterious stranger.

But they had not killed him yet. Instead they had taken Kane and thrown him in a cell in the castle’s cellars. Now a thick wooden door fastened by a stout bar stood between Kane and three menacing guards. Through a narrow grilled aperture in the door, Baron Troylin regarded his prisoner.

“You know you’re making a mistake in this,” offered Kane.

“I suppose you killed Lystric because you knew he’d unmask you. And to think you even had me suspecting poor man!”

“Damn your thick skull! That old fool couldn’t count his fingers and get a correct answer! I told you I found him like that before the werewolf knocked me senseless by the stairs!”

“Strikes me as a bit odd this werewolf didn’t kill you—even went to the trouble to drag you across the room. Didn’t know such a thing had that much restraint.”

Kane pounded his fist on the wall in frustration. “It may be a monster, but the creature’s as cunning as any man. Looks like it hoped to frame me and throw the rest of you off the scent.”

Troylin snorted in disbelief. “Speaking of framing, that’s a nice job you did on my son. Guess you figured to make it look like he’d broken loose and slain the lot! Only we caught you before you could finish preparations—had to stop for a meal, I guess! Too bad you didn’t arrange for Henderin to escape first. You might have had us all believing it was him!”

“You’re just so damned anxious to clear that son of yours, you’ll grasp at anything else that presents itself! Why wasn’t I a werewolf when Evingolis found me? Why didn’t I kill him and escape? How’d I get this crack on the skull? Why did I rescue your daughter from the wolves?”

“Oh, I’ll agree there’s a few things that don’t seem to check out. That’s the only reason you’re still alive—which you won’t be if you try to break out of here! Most of them would be just as happy to see you burning right now, only I figure I owe you at least a chance.

“So we’ll just watch you a few days—Henderin too, just to be safe. If the creature strikes again, we’ll be sorry for doubting you.”

“More than likely you’ll be dead—and me with you! And what if nothing more happens?”

The baron shook his head grimly. “Guess then we’ll just have to build a fire for you to sit in.”

Kane cursed in frustration as the baron departed. The yokels would do just that, and Troylin would consider Henderin cleared of guilt. Meanwhile if the werewolf still were at large, which seemed an absolute certainty, the idiots would drop their guard and let him roam at will. He sat down in disgust, enjoying the agony of his battered skull.

After several hours of watching vermin crawl through the straw, Kane heard a fierce growl. He jumped to the door and saw one of the baron's hounds bristling before the entrance.

"Stay back, milady! He's on guard and he'll bite your pretty leg sure's the world if you go any nearer!"

"Then call him off! I want to talk to Kane!" It was Breenanin.

"The baron said no one was to talk to Kane except him." Some coins tinkled. "Well, guess you can see him just for a moment. Make it short though! Don't want to make trouble. Come here, Slasher! Easy boy! Cut that growling now! Hear me!"

Breenanin's frightened face appeared before the spyhole. "Oh Kane!" she cried. "I was sure they'd kill you!"

"About what I figured," he replied. "Thanks for pulling for me with your father. I'm afraid though that they're convinced I'm their werewolf, and either way things don't look too bright for me."

She looked at him in consternation. "Well, I know you can't be a monster! Not after you saved me from those dreadful wolves! Anyway, you're too gentle to be a monster!"

Kane started. No one had accused him of gentleness in some time.

"They're wrong, I know! And time will prove it to them!" She stopped uncertainly. "But the only way they'll know you're innocent will be for the werewolf to kill again..." She trailed off, unsure where this left her. It seemed horrible to hope for more deaths, but if the creature stayed hidden, then this man whom she believed she loved would die hideously in the flames.

"The werewolf is still here, you can be sure of that. But whether it'll attack again soon, who can say. It's true that steel can't hurt them, though! I should have cut the beast in half by all logic, but my blade rebounded without a mark. Uncanny sensation—it was all solid flesh when it hit me, but my sword was turned back as if I'd struck stone. Left my whole arm numb from the impact.

"They say only a few things can kill a werewolf, outside of more potent sorcery. Fire, of course. Silver is said to be the only metal to pierce its magic invulnerability. Outright physical combat can hurt one, too. I've read of wolves tearing them in rare battles for leadership of a pack. If you have anything silver to use for a weapon, you might keep it near you. If the baron would only listen to me, he should cast some silver points for arrows or spears."

"I'll try to talk him into it," Breenanin answered brightly. "And I've got a little silver bladed dagger that I wear for hunts. Not much of a weapon really—just a lady's toy—but I'll keep it under my pillow."

The guard muttered anxiously, "Hey, come on now, milady! If the baron finds you here of all people, he'll damn sure flay me! Cut things short!"

"I've got to run now," she told him wistfully. "I'll see what I can do. Don't worry!" She ducked from the aperture and left the dreary cellar.

Kane listened to the watchdog's snarl, and an uneasy thought recurred to him. Where had Breenanin been during these murderous attacks? Something about her presence in that tree and the wolves' half-hearted attempts to reach her had been nagging the back of his mind for some time.

He shook the thoughts away. Again only guesses and circumstances! Any man here could be shown guilty by that course! Troylin, Evingolis, Tali—any of the baron's men. And she was but a girl!

But wasn't the she-wolf fully as dangerous as the male?

X. Fangs in the Night

When the light of the full moon shone whitely through the bars of his window, Henderin knew it was time. Most of the furniture of his room was in shambles—smashed during his rages. Now he rose from the nest of litter he had collected in one corner; he assumed a crouched stance and began to shuffle stealthily about the debris-strewn chamber, a low growl in his throat. It was hard to think at times, but he fixed the details of what he must do into his disordered brain. Excitement over what must happen tonight ran riot through his senses, and he delighted in prowling around, listening for sounds of his guards, savoring the thrift of the adventure.

All was silent. Henderin slipped to his window and looked down over the courtyard below. Nothing moved. Satisfied that none watched, Henderin pulled at the stone at the base of the window ledge, grunting with the strain. As he knew it would, the stone tore free of its setting, for the crude mortar which held it in place had been carefully weakened. He placed the heavy stone on the floor of the room, then turned to the iron bars. With the stone removed, the bars set exposed in their sockets, which had been cut into adjoining faces of the inside and outside stones of the ledge. Henderin easily worked the bars out of their half sockets below and slid them down from their upper attachment to the wall.

The way cleared, he swung onto the ledge and carefully lowered his body over the edge. Now was the difficult part, but one which he knew he could carry out. The wall was built of rough-cut stones, whose edges jutted outward unevenly. The tireless hand of the elements had eroded enough of the grainy mortar to provide an appreciable crevice between the rough stones. These furnished a precarious hold at best, but to one of Henderin's strength and agility it was sufficient purchase to climb down the wall and drop into the empty courtyard. And furthermore, Henderin obeyed secret urgings beyond all denial—he could not fail.

With a bark of triumph he dropped the last few feet. It had been a faultless escape. Laughing softly, Henderin vanished into the shadows of the courtyard. There was much yet to accomplish.

The castle slept uneasily. Death had struck relentlessly among its inhabitants. Even now, when the creature who held them all in cold letter must be securely locked and guarded, a fearful doubt yet gnawed at their hearts. But still man must have sleep. So they trusted to locks and guards and slumbered fitfully—this pitiful remnant of the castle's household.

And in the silent hallways, death stalked. No human eyes had seen it slip across the snow strewn courtyard and in the shadow of the gate softly draw back the bar. Only the dead eyes of Gregig the porter—he had slept at his post a final time—watched the long, gray shapes slink through the opening in an endless line of red death. No one saw as this silent pack of blood-mad wolves followed its leader through a small, unguarded door in the castle's rear.

Nails clicking softly on the dusty stone, the deadly horde padded across the unfrequented storage room and penetrated the heart of the castle.

The hounds were first to scent the presence of their natural enemies, and they greeted the pack with fierce snarls. Thus the men who patiently stood guard outside Henderin's empty chamber looked upon death.

For one startled moment they were frozen in horror as the howling wolves and their nightmare leader raced through the hall toward them. Then they shouted the alarm and drew their swords for a desperate last stand. The shouts of the doomed retainers added to the snarl of the lunging wave of gray fury—and the combatant swirled in a howling, milling melee!

This time the wolves faced not helpless sleepers or unsuspecting victims. The retainers were well armed and mad with the hopelessness of their position. Dripping swords hewed into the onrushing ranks, smashing through one furred devil after another. The hounds battled gamely beside their masters, equally determined to meet death with as many of their hated enemy as possible. The stones ran slippery with blood, as the halls resounded with shrieks and howls of agony.

But the wolves were too many, and their awesome leader made them invincible. In unspeakable fury the werewolf leapt among the struggling figures and seized one of the soldiers. Ignoring the human's desperate sword thrusts, it hurled its helpless prey against the stone floor, smashing his skull with the impact. Already the hounds had gone down under an avalanche of slashing fangs, and the remaining humans now fettered before the pack. Blood spurting from frightful wounds, they continued to hack wildly at their slayers, even as the pack pulled them down to mangled extinction.

Then the hallway was still, but for the death throes of a few wolves. For an instant the pack stood panting, tasting the warm salt of their victims' lifeblood. Already sounds could be heard as the others responded to the alarm. The werewolf raised a chilling howl of maddened power, then led its pack dashing down the hallways to find the rest of these terrified weaklings, whose stupid pride it was to be man.

Sounds of the battle above them penetrated even to the cellar room where Kane was imprisoned. The guards dropped their dice and listened. "What the hell is that!" gasped Tali in shocked amazement. Kane jumped to the door to see what was happening.

Someone threw open the door at the head of the stairs and shouted down, "Come on! Hurry! Wolves! The castle's full of wolves! Hurry or they'll kill us all!"

The guards rose up in panic. Snatching their weapons they ran up the stairs to join their rallying comrades.

“Wait! Damn you! Wait!” Kane bellowed futilely. “Come back and let me out of here! Come back! Thro’ellet take you all!” He shouted after the last man had disappeared up the stairs, but it was useless. Either out of panic or distrust they had left him here. In disgust he envisioned the fight in the upper floors of the castle and its probable end. Bitterly he pictured himself sitting here helpless while the werewolf and its pack came to finish the prisoner trapped in his cell.

Kane strained to see the fastening of the door through the spyhole . He knew it was secured by a heavy wooden bar, for as they had thrown him in, he had automatically examined the fixtures of his cell. In the short glance he had had, it had seemed that the iron fastenings that protruded from the stories of the wall, and upon which the bar rested, would be the weakest point. With this in mind he backed off across the cell, then hurled his over 300 pounds of bone and corded muscle against the unhinged side of the door.

He ricocheted painfully from the bruising impact. The door held solid. Making another attempt, he again tried the door. It seemed to rattle slightly more loosely. Perhaps the iron fastening was pulling away from its setting in the stone. But the jarring crashes against the unyielding door were dealing him brutal punishment. Altering his strategy, Kane launched himself in a flying kick at the spot where the bar reached across the door to the bracket. With startling agility for his bulk, Kane landed lightly after the blow. He knew the fantastic power such a kick could deliver when properly executed.

He lashed out again. And again. Teeth set in determination, he battered the door of his prison relentlessly. The iron bracket would give sometime, he was certain. But how much time was left to him, he could not guess.

Within her chamber Breenanin listened in terror to the fierce struggle outside her door. She had awakened with these sounds in her ears—the shouts of the castle’s defenders and the enraged snarling of the wolves. The death cries of man and beast. She tried to imagine how the battle was turning, but from her chamber she could tell little. And the scenes offered by her terrified imagination drove her to hysteria.

On Kane’s warning she had provided herself with a silver dagger, although the weapon seemed laughably inadequate. In addition she had tied a silver chain across the fastenings of both tier door and the shutters of her windows. She had little faith in their efficacy, but it had been something she could do.

The fight now seemed to be moving to another quarter, for its clamor was growing dim. What could be happening out there? she wondered. From what she had heard, evidently a great pack of wolves had invaded the castle.

A sudden rattle on the stories outside one of her windows caught her attention! In abject horror Breenanin riveted her eyes on the shutters. From without now came unmistakable sounds of something scraping and clambering upon the ledge!

A heavy blow smote the shutters, caving them back dangerously! Petrified with terror, Breenanin watched the fastenings with awful fascination. Another blow! And one more! With a brittle crack, the lock splintered and the silver chain snapped apart!

And through the wreckage of the shutters leapt—Henderin!

Her brother was almost unrecognizable. His fingers were torn and bleeding; his clothing disordered. There was stark madness in his rolling eyes, and his teeth gnashed wildly. Blood ran upon his face and spotted his chest.

He dropped to the floor in a crouch. With a bizarre blend of titter and growl, he began to stalk his fear-sickened sister!

Breaking from the spell of dread that bound her, Breenanin uttered a soul-tearing shriek and bounded across the room for the door. Behind her Henderin shambled, mouthing insane slobbering noises.

In panic she fumbled with the bolt of the door, pulling loose the silver chain. Gasping, she freed the bolt and shot it back! She swung wide the door!

And looked into the face of gore-splattered nightmare!

Howling in hideous glee the werewolf lunged from the crimson tiled hallway through the gaping doorway! For the moment it had chosen to allow its pack to fend for itself against the crumbling ranks of the castle's defenders. Its red eyes brimming with unspeakable lust, the slaving demon stretched forth its talons for the terror stricken object of its desire.

Breenanin recoiled in absolute horror as the hulking abomination stalked across the room toward her. Henderin was forgotten in the face of this inhuman beast of scarlet streaked white that now crept toward her in dreadful certainty of its prey. In a moment the werewolf had her trapped in one corner of the bed chamber. The creature slowed, a snarl of fiendish laughter in its throat; it clashed together the awful fangs of its long muzzle, savoring to the fullest the piteous terror of its victim. In despair Breenanin hurled an urn at her attacker, but the werewolf disdained even to dodge, and the vessel smashed into fragments against its hairy chest. It moved toward her confidently.

“No!” shrieked a voice that had been stripped of its humanity. “No! You can't have her! You said she would be mine!”

The werewolf halted and flung a contemptuous snarl across its shoulder to the frantic Henderin. The insane youth was gnashing his teeth and jumping about in the frenzy of his rage. Ignoring the, frothing madman, the creature returned to the focus of its dark appetite.

In a silent blur Henderin pounced upon the werewolf's back! Driving his knees into the creature's spine, Henderin dashed it to the floor; even as they toppled he locked his arms about its neck and dug his teeth into the flesh of its nape. Caught off guard by the human's strike, werewolf and madman rolled to the floor before Breenanin's feet. Henderin was a powerful man, and his strength was doubled by the surge of his insane rage. Pressing his advantage, he forced the creature's snout into the stones, while continuing to crush his knees into its spine.

Reacting in the fury of its pain, the werewolf raked its assailant with its claws, at last securing a grip on the human. With a burst of strength it ripped the writhing youth from its back and hurled him across the floor. Henderin landed heavily, but rolled to his feet in time to meet the monster's charge.

For a moment they lashed punishing blows at each other, neither of them able to secure a hold on his opponent. Then they flung themselves together in a clawing, gnashing embrace of deadly hatred; they struggled viciously for several heartbeats, and fell in a tangle on the floor. Over and over they rolled, as each sought to remain on top.

Freed from her corner, Breenanin shook off her paralysis of fear and darted across the room for her bed. Flight did not register with her—for the werewolf seemed inescapable. But she remembered Kane's advice now, and in a frenzy she sought underneath the bedclothing. She felt a surge of hope as her small hand closed about the cold hilt of the silver dagger. Drawing the white, bladed weapon free, she turned

to the thrashing combatants!

Henderin had neither the strength nor the means to press home the initial advantage of his sudden attack. Only luck and his berserk strength had made it possible for him to hold out this long. But now the werewolf was astride his struggling body. Locking its long arms about its victim's chest, the monster squeezed him in a crushing embrace of death. Even as the ribs cracked rottenly, its razor-like fangs tore through Henderin's failing guard and sank into the human's neck! Ultimate blackness closed upon the youth's tormented mind, as human muscle and bone proved unequal to the test. Overcome with blood-lust, his slayer greedily gulped down the gushing flow from the ruined throat of its victim.

Seeing her chance, Breenanin rushed upon the momentarily pre-occupied werewolf. Her lithe arm raised high; then she drove the silver blade with all the desperation of her fear and loathing into the creature's unprotected left shoulder! It sensed the danger at the last moment and tried to avoid the blow, but too late! Only slightly off its target, the keen blade sheared through inhuman flesh and glanced along the scapula!

Had the dagger been as long as a real weapon, the stab would have been a mortal wound. Instead, the werewolf howled in unaccustomed agony and sprang to its feet. Only barely did Breenanin succeed in maintaining her desperate grasp on the dagger's hilt, as the werewolf wrenched itself free in its lunge.

Its pale fur now matted with its own blood, the werewolf whirled to face its small assailant. Fury was in its eyes, but as Breenanin raised her dagger to strike again, something like panic also appeared. The dread held by the creature for the silver weapon was out of all proportion to a human's judgment. But the inhuman mind recognized a threat to its existence—a threat that held all the more terror because of its unfamiliarity. Wounded and uncertain, the werewolf decided to try a safer strategy. Snarling defiance it sprang to the open window and leapt from the room to the courtyard thirty feet below.

Sick and shaken from her hideous ordeal, Breenanin slumped to the floor, moaning incoherent sobs. In her shocked state of mind she knew only that the ravening demon had left her—beyond this she could not understand. Weakly she dragged herself to the torn corpse of her brother. She realized dimly that his intervention had preserved her from an abominable fate, and with this came the recognition that this importunity had cost the life of her brother.

Forgetting his madness and the crimes perpetrated under its cloak, she fell upon Henderin's mangled body and sobbed hysterically. She did not even hear the shuttling footsteps that pushed through the doorway behind her.

Baron Troylin staggered drunkenly into the room, his mind fogged with pain and horror. Behind him tottered two of his retainers, similarly weakened from numerous wounds. Troylin seemed to regard his shuddering daughter without recognizing her. "All dead," he intoned dully. "All dead but us. The werewolf even smashed in the door where the women were hidden and let his pack loose on them." No one listened to Troylin, not even himself. Only his mind numbly recounted the events of the past half hour.

"Wolves everywhere. Those awful bloody fangs. Snapping. Leaping at you from all sides. Once you're down they just tear you to ribbons. Somehow we stopped them. Their leader left them. Werewolf gone we could hold out against the rest. Kill the devils. So damn many though. Drove them off somehow. Finally they stopped coming. Don't know if they're all dead too, or just run off. But we're all that are left."

He stopped his mumbling and stared dumbly at his daughter. Slowly his eyes began to focus. He saw her stretched beside the scarlet stained body of... Recognition dawned. Screaming an oath he raced to his

son's side and flung his daughter away.

"Henderin!" His soul broke under the shriek of anguish. "Henderin! My son! Not you too!" He collapsed in the hysteria of his grief.

Breenanin recovered somewhat. Her father and his men had returned. She was safe with them. Hesitantly she laid a hand on his heaving shoulders. "Father," she stammered.

His face snapped upward to gaze at her. In his eyes the light of madness burned. The baron had been a simple, straightforward man. During the nights of fear he had lived under strains unimaginable to his worldly mind. And under the relentless terror and slaughter of this final battle with the wolves, he had seen the comfortable world that he knew fall to crimson destruction. Death had brushed by him everywhere, and now he looked upon the mutilated corpse of his son, his most beloved possession. With the crushing weight of grief and horror, his mind had broken.

Now he stared at his daughter's bloodstained nightdress. She recoiled before the soulless gaze of a stranger. "You!" shrieked the baron shrilly. "You!" He clutched the silver dagger which Breenanin had dropped and lurched to his feet. "You killed him! You're the werewolf! You killed them all!"

Mouthing insane curses, Troylin grasped his terrified daughter. The silver blade flashed downward! A gasping shriek of agony. Sound of a soft form failing to the floor. White hands strained as they plucked ineffectually at the pain.

Stillness.

He gazed at her fallen form. Death eased the lines of fear and pain. Below her left breast a spreading crimson over her white gown, pale flesh. Red on white. Tumbling images through his mind. Red on white over and over. Days, nights of red on white. So much red. So much white. And the end?

A harsh snarl behind him broke off his kaleidoscopic thoughts. Troylin ran to the doorway. The werewolf had returned.

One retailer was already dying, his throat ripped open from the savage fangs that had struck without warning. While they had stood there gaping at their master's madness, death had stolen upon them from behind. Troylin watched in the agony of disbelief as the werewolf brushed aside the other's frantic sword thrusts and crushed his neck in its taloned hands. The creature was unkillable then!

It turned at last to the baron, scarlet fury blazing in its eyes. Unarmed, he backed away in horror, pitiful pleas slobbering from nerveless lips. The creature advanced relentlessly, arms outstretched and a low growl in its throat. Something pushed against the baron's back. It was the balcony railing! He could retreat no farther!

With a howl the werewolf lunged for him! It raised the screaming man high above its head. Then it threw him from the balcony, arcing him high over the great hall. With a sickening crunch, the baron's body bounced upon the stone floor, but half a step from his place at the high table.

And as life leaked from his smashed skull, a flash of sanity returned to the human. In that moment Baron Troylin knew that the end to the kaleidoscope was death.

One final kick and the cell door flew open; the stubborn iron bracket had at last been torn from its socket. Breathing heavily from the exertion, Kane limped from the cell. Around him all was silent. No wolves met his sight.

Carefully he ran up the stairs from the cellar and peered along the empty corridors. Again nothing. Silently he slipped down the hallways, heading for the main part of the castle. As he had no weapon, he moved with extreme caution, knowing that his chances were slim should he encounter the pack. But nothing challenged his progress, other than an occasional cluster of dead. From the many human and wolf carcasses he met, it was clear that within the castle had been fought a vicious battle.

His keen ears caught the sound quickly, and he smiled grimly as he recognized it. Silently he followed it to its source. He entered the great hall.

Evingolis sat in his accustomed corner, his long fingers once more drawing haunting notes from the lute. The two regarded one another in the stillness of the darkened hall.

Kane broke the quiet. "So it was you. I was a fool not to have realized it before! I had suspicions—but I felt the same way toward too many others."

The minstrel continued to play, favoring his left arm slightly. "They seldom realize until it's too late," he began. "No one expects violence of a minstrel—an albino, at that. Over and over it's happened. I prepare the trap, and while they're falling one by one, the survivors fight among themselves with fear and suspicion. Break down trust, and men are helpless. And no one suspects the minstrel. Always it goes that way,"

"Always?"

"Perhaps. The pattern repeats itself. Variations fall within the frame. Usually it happens as it did here. I wander into a new place, play around the area, pick up information until I find an arrangement that I can manipulate.

"And once I succeed in isolating a group of men into a situation that I control, my pack and I wreak our vengeance! For it is your race, Kane, that dared to leave its home in the trees to challenge the Brotherhood! Man and his weapons and his traitor hounds! Man who seeks to banish the Brotherhood to the wastelands! Man who declares his stifling cities to be civilization—a society superior to the wild freedom of the pack!

"Perhaps the day shall come when man and his cities shall be destroyed by the plagues, the famines, the wars his idiocy perpetuates. And then shall the Brotherhood once again run free. But until then there will be those in your smug flock who will pay the penalty for the insolence of your race! These shall know the wrath of the Brotherhood!

"Here it was rather simple. I found out in Carrasahl that Baron Troylin owned this conveniently isolated estate; then it was just a matter of discovering how to get him here. Easy enough. A spell on his son causes him to run berserk, a scandal results, and the baron is forced to retire. This way I not only could use Henderin for a scapegoat, but under the spell I could also control his actions. He was useful at times—and so was old Lystric. The fool gladly took credit for any suggestions I offered—even to bring Henderin up here.

“So I have a sizable party of humans isolated from their fellows. Next step is to cut off escape. The storm I summoned took care of that part. I almost had you on two occasions that night, but you eluded me each time. Then it was simply a matter of slowly cutting down their strength until an outright attack could destroy the remnant. My strategy should be obvious to you by now. At first I arranged for my wolves to split the hunt by driving a second elk across your path, then they ambushed your half. They should have killed you then, but again I underestimated you.”

“Then you know who I am,” said Kane, “—and what I am.”

The minstrel laughed softly. “Yes, I know about you—and I’ve guessed a lot more. As I’ve wandered I’ve cut across your trail occasionally—it seems neither of us stays in one place very long! And I’ve heard a good many stories about a wanderer named Kane. The old legends and sagas haven’t forgotten you either. Even that old fool Lystric had some suspicions of the truth about you.”

He laughed again. Kane remembered the panting laughter of the wolf—soft, tongue lolling. “I even saw you once in my youth—over a century ago now, in old Lynortis. You were scheming your way into the court, I recall. The city was destroyed not long after that—by treachery within, the tale was.

“So your presence here had me worried after I realized who you were. But I soon found a use for you as an added diversion. You played into my hands last night in Lystric’s chamber. I spared you then in order to make it appear as if you were the werewolf everyone so desperately feared. If they killed you as I had intended, then you would be taken care of, and the rest would relax their vigilance. Instead they let you live, split their strength to guard both you and Henderin, and were still careless.

“Tonight I had Henderin escape again, planning to use him for a diversion while I let my pack inside the castle. As it happened I didn’t need him for that—the guard at the gate slept until the moment Henderin killed him. Later when I discovered Breenanin had barred her chamber with silver, I used him to break in and drive her out. The fool attacked me then, and I had to kill him before I had intended. The bitch had spirit though! She stabbed me with a little dagger, and I left to circle around.

“Meanwhile Troylin had been able to fight off my wolves in my absence. But I came on him outside her room and finished them.”

Kane surveyed the destruction about him, the smashed figure on the floor. “And Breenanin?” he asked, wondering that he felt concern.

Evingolis snarled. “That gross fool killed her himself! The idiot must have thought she was to blame for all my work. Killed her with her own dagger!” Kane winced. “Really makes me furious—I had some interesting plans for the girl! She’s still warm and I suppose I can still have some fun—but it isn’t the same as when her struggling heart forces hot red spurts over your muzzle!”

He laughed again, running a long tongue over his lips in memory of unspeakable pleasures. “What’s wrong, Kane? I know you aren’t squeamish about such things. No, I think you really felt something for that girl. Love? You don’t even know what the word means! Kane—doomed with the curse of eternal wandering—in love with a mortal girl! A flower who would be faded and gone before you could even understand! Her lifetime a day of yours! By this nine you’ve surely seen this happen enough to understand the absurdity of it! No, I know what it was! She loved you—and you were simply stunned to receive anything other than false love artificially induced by your cunning manipulations—and more often by far, to receive only fear and hatred! And you were so moved with the novelty you tried to discover tenderness in that stone you call your heart! Ah, Kane! You’ve crown soft headed in your dotage!”

Kane stared silently at the taunting minstrel. In his eyes the cold flames of death were leaping.

“Yes, it is a rare jest! And here the two of us stand— human shapes in a hall of death. Human in shape only, for the humans all lie dead! Kane—you’re as far apart from this carrion in your own way as I am in mine! Two immortals, it seems, and both of us leave only death and destruction in our wake! I wonder, Kane! The wretch I killed at the first of my storm—from beyond death he made a prophecy that out of the storm would come a man not man who would bring death to all! I wonder though—which of us did he mean!”

The albino laid aside his lute, still chuckling wolfishly. “Well Kane, this has been a most interesting game. I salute you. You have led an extraordinary career, to use an absurd understatement. I admire you. Perhaps I understand you. And you of all men are the first to command my respect.

“I will derive immense pleasure from killing you!” He arose.

Kane had been prepared for the change, but he had not expected its abruptness. One instant the minstrel stood laughing before him—there was a split-second blur, as if Kane’s eyes had momentarily gone out of focus—then a snarling hulk of white furred death was leaping for him!

That ruined one chance, cursed Kane, who had hoped to launch his attack while the creature was in the throes of transformation. As Evingolis hurtled toward him, Kane grasped the table which separated them, and heaving with all his fantastic strength he hurled the massive structure full against the rushing beast. The werewolf went under in a crashing tangle of splintering furnishings. For a moment it had to free itself from the wreckage; in that second’s hesitation Kane dashed for the stairs at the end of the hall. From the minstrel’s story, the silver dagger should still be impaled in Breenanin’s lifeless form, growing cold in her chamber. Kane knew his chance of reaching it was slight, but it would be a weapon against the werewolf if he could get to it.

He pounded up the stairs. Howling in rage, Evingolis tore clear of the wreckage and hurtled after Kane. Kane had a slight lead and he moved with all his great speed, but before he had reached the top stair his awesome pursuer had nearly overtaken him. Snatching claws raked his boot. Kane made the top and tried desperately to reach the door of Breenanin’s room. Halfway there and he knew he would never make it—another few steps and the werewolf would be on him!

Kane suddenly leapt into the air, pivoted in midflight, and lashed out with his boot into the chest of the werewolf. The power of his blow knocked the creature backward, grunting in surprise and pain. The dagger was beyond reach. Kane knew his only chance would be to kill his assailant with sheer physical force. But man against demon seemed hopelessly mismatched. Yet Kane was not an ordinary man.

As Evingolis fettered from the surprise kick of the human, Kane hurled himself against the werewolf! Driven with the brutal power of his thick legs, Kane’s massive body caught Evingolis off balance and sent him reeling backward over the brink of the stairs. Wrapped in a deadly embrace, man and demon plummeted down the long, stairway, rolling over and over, crashing agonizingly against the steps and wall! With a surge of strength Kane gained a brief contact with the spinning stairway and used the purchase to push their fall over the edge. Splintering the railing, the locked combatants plunged off into space ten feet above the stone floor under them! Kane wrenched himself atop the snarling werewolf just before they smashed onto the floor.

The force of the fall flung them apart. Evingolis’s furry body had cushioned Kane’s fall, and he rolled away with only severe bruises from the tumble. Leaping to his feet he faced his enemy again. The fall would have crushed a human antagonist, but Evingolis appeared only to be even more enraged. Still he

seemed to be a little stunned and staggered as he rose to meet Kane.

Once again Kane rushed the werewolf, hoping to hit him before he could recover. But the creature leapt aside, catching Kane in a loose grip, and threw him across the floor. Kane skidded over the stones, breaking his fall, and he was able to catch himself just as Evingolis sprang for him. With lightning speed Kane pulled up his legs, and with his back on the floor he caught the lunging beast on the chest and hurled him on over his body. The werewolf landed heavily, but was again on his feet with Kane.

The two circled warily, watching for the other to offer an opening. Evingolis was amazed with the human's strength and speed—and the punishment he had taken was considerable. Painfully throbbing and bleeding once more, the dagger wound was handicapping him. Raw fury coursed through his demon brain. He must kill this human—must tear out his life. Kane was badly battered as well, but his hellish blood lust was fully aroused. No fear did he experience—only the insane desire to kill and destroy. Silently they waited for the other to make a mistake.

Evingolis's impatience to kill his human foe spurred him to break the impasse. Confident in his inhuman strength and razor-like weapons, the werewolf sprang! Kane knew to leap back would only leave him exposed to the followup of the creature's attack. Again he did the unexpected. Ducking down, Kane let his opponent's clutching arms pass over him; then he hurled himself at the creature's throat!

Kane's powerful hands gripped the werewolf's furry throat, holding those gnashing tusks away from his straining flesh. Evingolis wrapped his long arms about the human's body, striving to crush his spine in this deadly embrace. They rocked back and forth in the gloom of the hall, two titanic figures straining with unbelievable strength to overpower the other. The pressure on Kane's ribs was unbearable, but his powerful muscles knotted to resist the awesome strength of the werewolf's embrace. All the while Kane tightened his strangler's grip about the thick throat of the demon.

Evingolis began to feel the consuming need for breath. He relentlessly tightened his crushing hold on Kane's trunk, trying to snap the human's back and thereby break his stranglehold. But the wound in his shoulder kept him from getting full use of one arm, and the werewolf had never encountered such massive strength and endurance in a human before. He champed his fangs futilely, unable to reach the human; clawing Kane's back with his fearsome talons, he fought the need for air. He could feel ribs starting to buckle under his tightening arms!

The pain from his back and ribs was a white hot agony now, but Kane continued to lock his hands about Evingolis's throat. He knew his only chance would be to outlast his opponent, even though the awful pressure made it almost impossible to force air into his own lungs. Suddenly the werewolf loosed his vice-like grip! Evingolis must have air; frantically he tried to break Kane's grip, snapping his slaving fangs and ripping wildly with his clawed hands!

They fell to the floor then. Kane landed atop the werewolf, and immediately he sought to pinion the punishing arms, whose talons now sought his face. Hunching forward on Evingolis's chest, Kane succeeded in pinning his shoulders with his knees. The creature writhed in great spasms, his limbs flailing desperately!

Then the wild struggles of the werewolf grew weaker. Its inhuman vitality was failing under the attack of a more powerful one. With glazing vision Evingolis stared into the cold blue eyes of Kane and recognized the death that flamed within. Under Kane's deadly hands suddenly grated the dull crunch of snapping vertebrae.

“Thus died Abel!” hissed Kane, slowly forcing his fingers to relax their deathhold .

There came that same abrupt blur over Evingolis's body, and Kane found himself clutching the broken neck of an albino wolf.

Epilogue

It was early morning, and a solitary horse and rider stood in the snow. Searching the outbuildings, Kane had come upon his own horse, overlooked by the wolves, and now well rested and fed. Painfully he had saddled him and put together a pack of provisions for another long ride. Kane had suffered several cracked and bruised ribs, along with numerous deep gashes and scratches from the werewolf's claws, but he dressed his wounds as well as he could and mounted, determined not to spend another night in the dead castle.

As he watched, the flames of the burning castle rose high into the air. Another floor had fallen in, and soon the stone walls would stand completely gutted. Kane had fired the structure before he left, making a giant funeral pyre for human and wolf alike. In those flames was now being destroyed the corpse of Evingolis as well; the minstrel would sing his songs and cast his webs no more.

Somewhere in those flames was being consumed another who would sing no more. Kane had wrapped her in her white fur cloak and laid her gently on her bed, before setting ablaze the pyre. Perhaps Breenanin had found peace, if death were peace. Kane could never experience either. Still he had for a moment experienced something with her—some emotion that he had forgotten he ever had known. Even in memory, he could not identify the sensation.

Kane shivered, suddenly realizing how cold it was.

He urged his mount southward. The snow was thickly crusted and bore him easily. But for spots.

MISERICORDE

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 Harnstern.

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 Harnstern.”

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 Hamsterm’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 Hamsterm’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. Sitalvon. 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 Harnstern 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 Harnstern, 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 Altham 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. Sivilvon, 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 Sivilvon'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, Sitolvon,” 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. Sivilvon 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 Sivilvon. “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 time 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 of 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,” Sitilvon 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?” Sitilvon 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.

Sitilvon 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 Sitilvon his wine and taking hers.

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

Sitilvon 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. Sitilvon, 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.”

Sitilvon’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.”

Sitilvon 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. Sitilvon clutched at her writing table, her legs nerveless. Kane’s hands reached out for her.

“Sitilvon, 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 Harnstern,” 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 it, 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, Sitalvon, 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 Harnstern 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."

THE OTHER ONE

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

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

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

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

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

They gathered about their fire, laying aside their well-worn gear, pulling out such as they had to make their evening meal. Three days march, or maybe four—and their leader promised them more plunder than they in might carry. This night the prospects did not bring the usual chatter of anticipation. Uneasily, the

men watched the closing storm, gloomily considered the plain of ruins beside which they were camped. For these were the ruins of Andalar the Accurst, and no man cared to linger in this place.

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

“Once there was pickings as rich as you’d dare dream,” another commented. “Andalar was the proudest city in the world.”

“And the gods destroyed Andalar for its pride,” a third intoned, with less scorn than had he spoken in another place than this. “Or so I’ve heard.”

“I’ve heard a number of tales,” the first bandit argued. “No one seems to remember anymore.”

“I remember,” their leader murmured.

“Do you indeed know the tale of the doom that came to this city? Pray, tell us the tale.”

Their leader laughed, as at a bitter jest, and began.

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

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

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

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

imminent decease.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But already they had come for them.

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

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

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

The contempt in his tone cut through the sonorous phrases of the high priest. "You are an outlander, Lord Kane. You hold high office such as no stranger before has been entrusted. Yet, outlander that you

are, there remains the final and highest duty that you must perform to your master.”

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

“What is this, Haeen?”

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

“Of course,” Kane agreed blandly, while behind his impassive face his thoughts were chaotic. His knowledge of this tradition-bound land was incomplete. Inglarn was purely a local deity, and Kane had not troubled to learn the secrets of his cult. Luisteren VII had ascended the throne as a child, more than seventy years before. In his concern with court intrigue, Kane had not delved overmuch into events beyond the memory of almost everyone in the city.

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

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

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

Haeen raised her voice in a shrill scream of horror.

It was not a time for reason. Kane’s blow rocked her head back with almost killing force. Pausing only to strap his sword across his back, Kane bundled the unconscious girl in his cloak and fled like a shadow from the palace.

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

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

Kane swore and sent his crippled horse stumbling off into the darkness. The false trail might throw off

pursuit for long enough to let him make good his escape. Haeen still seemed to be in shock—either from his fist or from his sacrilege—but she followed him silently as Kane struck out on foot.

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

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

Haeen huddled miserably on a boulder, watching as Kane prowled about along the mist-lapped escarpment.

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

“Kane, Kane,” Haeen moaned hopelessly. “You can’t escape. You don’t even know what sin you propose. Kane, this is *wrong!*”

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

“Kane.” She shook her midnight mane. “You don’t understand. You’re an outsider. You *can’t* understand.”

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

“Oh, Kane.” Haeen’s face was tortured. “You scorn our laws. You scorn our gods. But this you *must* understand.”

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

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

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

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

“Of course.”

“Andalar is the oldest city in the world.”

“One of the wealthiest, I’ll grant you—but far from the oldest.”

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

“I’m sorry. Please go on.” Kane thought he could see a path that might lead downward, but the mist was

too thick to be sure.

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

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

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

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

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

“There must be a way down to the river not far from here,” Kane mused aloud. “It might be best if I seek it out by myself, then come back for you.”

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

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

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

“But this is *my* land.”

“No longer. I’ll take you to a thousand more.”

“Only hold me for this moment.”

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

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

And she kissed him, and murmured.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SING A LAST SONG OF VALDESE

I. The Girl Beneath the Oak

“Reverence! Hold up a moment!” The burly priest drew rein in a swirl of autumn leaves. Calloused fingers touched the plain hilt of the sword strapped to his saddle as his cowed head bent in the direction of her call.

Raven-black hair twining in the autumn wind, the girl stepped out from the gnarled oaks that shouldered the mountain trail. Bright black eyes smiled up at him from her wide-browed, strong-boned face. Her mouth was wide as well, and smiled.

“You ride fast this evening reverence.”

“Because the shadows grow deeper, and I have a good way to ride to reach the inn ahead.” His voice was impatient.

“There’s an inn not more than a mile from here.” She swayed closer, and he saw how her full figure swelled against her long-skirted dress.

The priest followed her gesture. Just ahead the trail forked, the left winding alongside the mountain river the right cutting along the base of the ridge. While the river road bore signs of regular travel, the other trail showed an aspect of disuse. Toward this the girl was pointing.

“That trail leads toward Rader,” he told her, shifting in his saddle. “My business is in Carrasahl.

“Besides,” he added “I was told the inn near the fork of the road had long been abandoned. Few have cause to travel to Rader since the wool fair was shifted south to Enseljos.”

“The old inn has lately been reopened.”

“That may be. But my path lies to Carrasahl.”

She pouted. “I was hoping you might carry me with you to the inn yonder.”

“Climb up and I’ll take you to the inn on the Carrasahl road.”

“But my path lies to Rader.”

The priest shrugged thick shoulders beneath his cassock. “Then you’d best be going.”

“But reverence,” her voice pleaded. “It will be dark long before I reach the inn, and I’m afraid to walk this trail at night. Won’t you take me there on your horse? It won’t take you far from your way, and you can lodge the night there just as well.”

Shadows were lengthening, merging into dusk along the foot of the ridges. The declining sun shed only a dusty rubrous haze across the hilltops, highlighting tall hardwoods already fired by autumn’s touch.

Streaked with mist, the valleys beyond were swallowed in twilight.

Night was fast overtaking him, the rider saw. He recalled the warnings of villagers miles behind, who for his blessing had given him food and sour wine. They had answered his questions concerning the road ahead, then warned him to keep to the trail if night caught him and on no account make camp by himself. The priest had not been certain whether they warned him of robbers or some darker threat.

His horse stamped impatiently.

“I could make it worth your while to ride out of your way.”

About to ride off, he glanced back down at her. Her smile was impish. Hidden by the cowl, his face could not be read.

She touched the ties of her embroidered bodice. “I would see that you had a most pleasant stay at Vald’s Cove Inn, reverence.” There was witchery in her voice. The bodice loosened, parted across her breasts.

“Though I can’t see your face, I can see there’s a man beneath that priest’s cassock. Would you like to enjoy a mountain flower tonight? You’ll remember her sweetness when you grow old in some musty temple.”

Her breasts were firm and well shaped. Against their whiteness the tan flesh of her nipples matched the color of the swirling oak leaves.

Whatever his interest in her, the priest carried gold beneath his robe. The girl’s eagerness to draw him onto a little-frequented trail aroused deep suspicion.

“The lure of wanton flesh is nothing to a priest of Thoem,” he intoned,

“Then bugger yourself!” she spat, and lunged with a shrill scream for his horse’s face. Sharp claws raked blood across his nose.

Already nervous, the horse screamed and reared. Caught by surprise, the priest lost his stirrups. Cassock flapping about his limbs, he scrambled for balance, then was thrown from the terrified mount. He fell heavily, somehow landing half on his feet, and cursed as his ankle turned under him.

The rearing horse bolted down the trail, took the right fork toward Rader, and disappeared. With mocking laughter, the girl ran after.

Limping badly, the priest stumbled after her, cursing with blasphemous invective. But the darkness quickly swallowed the flash of her white legs, though her laughter taunted him invisibly still.

II. The Inn by the Side of the Road

The lights of the inn were smoky yellow through the thick, leaded panes. The night winds caught the smoke and smell of horses, drove it down the road to Rader, so that the priest came upon the inn all at once.

He noted the many horses tethered in the outlying stables. There were a number of travellers at the inn tonight, and it seemed less likely that the girl meant to lead him into a trap. Or had her confederates lain in wait along the trail, probably they were content to steal his horse and gear. The priest swore angrily, decided he had been too suspicious.

His ankle stabbed with pain, but at least it bore his weight. His boots had probably prevented worse injury. He damned the voluminous grey cassock as it flapped about his trousered legs. It was slitted front and back from ankle to mid thigh, and while that enabled him to straddle a horse, he blamed the clumsy garment for his fall.

The two-storey square log structure was a welcome sight. The autumn night grew chill; mist flowed like waves across the ridges. A night spent in the open would be uncomfortable at best. Worse, he had been warned of danger, and his sword was strapped to his saddle somewhere in the darkened hills.

A sign hung over the door: Vald's Cove Inn. The carving seemed of recent work, the priest noted as he climbed up to the door. The latch was not out, though the hour was not late, Hearing voices within, he knocked loudly.

He was about to knock a third time, when the door was opened. Light and voices and the smell of warmth spilled out into the night.

A narrow, beardless face frowned out at him from the half-open doorway. "Who... what do you want... reverence?" His voice was thin and nervous, and he spoke in half-whisper.

"Food and lodging," the priest tumbled impatiently. "This *is* an inn, I believe. The priest's huge fist checked him. "Are you a fool? Where is the innkeeper?" he demanded, suspicious at the man's show of anxious confusion.

"I'm master here," the other snapped in annoyance. "I'm sorry, reverence. I've no more room, and you'll have to—"

"Look, damn you!" The priest's bulk shouldered onto the threshold. "My horse threw me, and I've hobbled for miles already to get here. Now I'll have food and lodging if it's no more than floor space near the fire!"

The skeletal innkeeper did not quail before the bigger man. His narrow jaw clamped in anger; he clenched his black-gloved hands.

"What is this, man?" demanded a voice from within. "Do I hear you denying lodging to a brother servant of Thoen! What manner of innkeeper are you?"

The innkeeper started, then cringed effusively. "Forgive me, eminence. I only meant that my accommodations were not sufficient for one of his reverence's—"

“Let him in, you idiot! Turn away a priest of Thoem, would you! I see it’s true how sadly you mountain folk have fallen in your respect for the true god! Let him in, do you hear?”

The priest pushed past the suddenly solicitous innkeeper. “Thank you, eminence. The manners of these folk are pitiable.”

There were several people in the common room of the inn. Seated alone at one of several small tables was a tall, thin man whose scarlet cassock identified him as an abbot in the priesthood of Thoem. Like the priest, his face was hidden by the cowed garment. He waved to the other man with a finely groomed, blue-veined hand.

“Come join me by the fire and have some wine,” he invited. “I see you’re limping somewhat. Did I hear you say your horse threw you? That’s bad luck. Our host must send his servants out to find it. Are you badly hurt?”

“Thoem saved me from serious harm, eminence, though I’d rather not walk another mile on it tonight.”

“I’m certain. More wine, innkeeper! And hurry with that roast! Would you starve your guests? Sit down here, please. Have we met? I am Passlo, on my way in the service of Thoem to take charge of the abbey at Rader.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Eminent Passlo.” The priest touched hands as he seated himself. “I am Callistratis, journeying in the service of Thoem to Carrasahl. I’ve heard the abbey at Rader has fallen to the Dualists in these evil times.”

The abbot scowled. “Certain rumors have reached us in the South. Word that there are certain rebel priests in the northern provinces who would contend that Thoem and Vaul are but dual expressions of the same deity. No doubt these heretics consider it prudent to align themselves with the god of these northern barbarians, now that the empire drifts into civil war.”

The priest poured wine and drank hunched forward so that his lips were hidden in the shadow of his cowl. “I have heard such attempts to vindicate the Dualist heresy. It may be that our errands are the same, Eminent Passlo.”

“Well, Revered Callistratis, that doesn’t surprise me. I’d sensed immediately that there was a presence about you that argued for more than the simple priest. But I’ll not intrude further on one whose mission requires that he travel incognito. But tell me, though, how would you deal with the Dualists?”

“By the prescribed formula for any heresy. They should all suffer impalement, their bodies left for night beasts and carrion birds.”

The abbot clapped him on the shoulder. “Splendid, Revered Callistratis! We are of one accord! It pleases me to know that those who believe unswervingly in Thoem’s sacred precepts have not all passed from the priesthood! I foresee a pleasant evening of theological discussion.”

“Come, revered gentlemen, don’t judge too harshly. After all, there is precedent for Dualism in the history of your priesthood.”

A short, stocky gentleman with a fine grey beard looked gravely at the priests. He straightened from the fire where he had stooped to light his pipe. A silver medallion embossed with a university seal depended

from a chain about his thick neck.

“Precedent?” the abbot snapped.

The short man nodded through a puff of smoke. “Yes. I refer to the dogma formalized under the reign of King Halbros I that Thro’ellet and Tloluvin are but dual identities of the evil principle. No one in the days of the monarchy considered such doctrine heretical, although ancient beliefs plainly ascribe separate identities to these demonlords .”

The abbot paused to consider. “An interesting point,” he conceded grudgingly, “although the manifold embodiments of evil are certainly acknowledged by our doctrine. Nonetheless, your argument does not hold in this instance, for there is but one true cosmic principle of good, whom true believers worship as Thoem. May I inquire, sir...?”

The grey-bearded gentleman blew smoke in a flourish. “I am Claesna, of the Imperial University at Chrosanthe. Your proposal of theological debate caught my ear, eminence. The prospect of intelligent discussion promises salvation from what I had previously feared would be a dull evening in a back-woods tavern. May I join you?”

“Claesna?” The abbot’s tone was surprise. “Yes, I’ve heard a great deal of you, sit. Please join us! Why does a scholar of your high renown pass through these dismal mountains?”

Claesna smiled acknowledgment. “I’m headed for Rader myself, actually. I’ve heard of certain inscriptions on what are said to be prehuman ruins near there. If so, I’d like to copy them for study and comparison with others that I’ve seen.”

“So it’s true that you plan to supplement Nentali’s *Interpretation of Elder Glyphics* ?” suggested the grey-cowled priest.

Claesna lifted a bushy eyebrow. “Supplant, not supplement, Revered Callistratis. Well, I see you are an extraordinarily well-informed man yourself. This does promise to be an illuminating evening.”

“Oh, please, learned gentlemen,” mimicked a sneering voice from the corner. “Don’t bore us all to death with such learned discussions.”

“Shut up, Hef!” A gruff voice cut him off. “You’ll find a neater death than boredom when we get to Rader!”

The other made an obscene reply. An open fist slapped on flesh, then sounded the clash of chains, subdued cursing.

“Ranvyas, you son of a pox-eaten whore, you busted that tooth half out of my head. Takes guts for a pissant bounty hunter like you to bust a man all chained up.”

“You had an even chance before the chains went on, Hef,” growled Ranvyas. “And you won’t need that tooth once I get you to Rader.”

“We’ll see, Ranvyas. Oh, we’ll see, won’t we? There was other smart bastards all set to count their bounty money, but ain’t one of them lived to touch a coin of it.”

Claesna indicated the two men in the near corner. One was a tall, lantern-jawed swordsman with

iron-grey hair who wore the green tunic of a ranger. The other, his prisoner, was a wiry man with pinched face and stained yellow heard, whose blue eyes seemed startlingly innocent for one weighed down with wrist and leg irons.

“That’s Mad Hef over there, whose black fame ought to be known even to you, revered sirs. Looks harmless enough, though I doubt all the prayers of your priesthood could cleanse his soul of the deeds he’s committed here in the mountains. They were talking about it before you came in. The ranger finally tracked him to the cave where he laired, and if he succeeds where so many other brave men have failed, the public executioner at Rader is due for a strenuous afternoon.”

From the rooms above came the echoing moan of a woman in agony.

The priest started from his chair, then halted half-crouched when none of the room’s other occupants seemed to pay heed.

Again the cry of pain ripped through the panelled hallway above, down the narrow log stairway. A door slammed at the foot of the stairs, muffled the outcry.

Two other travellers exchanged glances. One, grotesquely fat, shrugged and continued to devour an apple pastry. His smaller companion shuddered and buried his chinless face in his hands.

“Pray Thoem, make her stop!” he moaned.

The fat man wiped his slobbery lips and reached for another pastry. “Drink more wine, Dordron. Good for the nerves.”

Passlo’s hand pulled at the priest’s arm. “Don’t be alarmed, Revered Callistratis. The merchant’s young wife is giving birth upstairs. No one thought to mention it. As you see, the father is untroubled. Only his brother seems a bit shaken.”

“The fat blob is a half-wit!” sneered Claesna. “I judge his mind is rotten with pox. I pity his wife, poor child. If our host hadn’t sent a serving girl to stay with her, these swine would certainly have left her to labor alone.”

“The mystery of birth,” quoted the abbot, “where pain is joyful duty.”

Now the innkeeper moved among them, setting before each guest a wooden trencher and loaf of black bread. Behind him walked a swarthy, bristle-bearded dwarf, the first servant the priest had noted in the inn. His squat, powerful arms carried a great platter of roast meat, which he presented to each guest that he might serve himself as he desired. The fat merchant growled impatiently when the dwarf halted first before the abbot and his two table companions.

“Please, Jarcos!” his brother begged. “Don’t offend these revered sirs!”

Hef giggled. “Don’t eat it all now! Save a nice hefty bone for poor toothless Hef!”

From overhead the screams, distant through the thick boards, sounded now at closer intervals.

The innkeeper smiled nervously and wrung his black-gloved hands. “I’ll bring out more wine, Bodger,” he told the dwarf. “Bring out your mandolin and play for them.”

The dwarf grinned and scuttled into the back rooms. He cavorted out again in a moment, wearing a flop-brim hat with a feather and carrying a black-stained mandolin. His strangely pointed fingers struck the strings like dagger tips, and he began to caper about the room, singing comic ballads in a bullfrog voice.

The moans from upstairs continued monotonously, and soon the travellers forgot to listen to them, or to notice when they ceased.

III. Do You Know the Song of Valdese?"

"Then, just as the hunter spun around at the sound, the werewolf leaped down from the roof of his cabin! He clawed for the silver dagger at his belt, but the sheath was empty! Too late he remembered the old man's warning! And as he died, he saw that the beast at his throat had the sun-colored eyes of his wife!"

Claesna leaned back against his chair and blew smoke at the listeners circled about the fire.

"Bravo!" squealed Jarcos, the fat merchant. "Oh, that was go, good! Do you mean that the werewolf was really his wife, then?"

Claesna did not deign to reply, instead nodded acceptance of the others' applause.

The meal was a scattering of picked bones and cheese rinds. The autumn night tightened its chill around the inn, where inside the travellers shared the companionship of wine and a warm fire. The hour grew late, but no one yet sought his bed. Pulling chairs in a rough circle about the glowing hearth, they had listened to the ballads of Bodger the dwarf, and as the night wore on someone had suggested that each tell a story.

"The mountains of Halbrosn seem haunted with all manner of inhuman fiends," Dordron remarked with a shiver. "Jarcos, why did you insist we make this journey to Rader? You know the wool market there has been dead for years."

"My astrologer agreed this was a wise venture. Let me worry about our business, little brother." Jarcos contrived to shape his rolls of chins into a resolute expression.

"Not only 'inhuman fiends' to watch for," Ranyvas commented, jerking a gnarled thumb toward his prisoner. "Up until two days ago there was Mad Hef here. Thoen knows how many poor travellers he's waylaid and murdered. Had a favorite trick of crawling out onto the road all covered with blood and moaning he was one of Mad Hef's victims. Too damn many good-hearted folks left their bones in the rocks for the mice to nest in. And I'd as soon forget if I could some of the things I seen back in that cave where he was laired."

Hef snickered and shook his chains against the post. “Got a special niche for your skull there, Ranvyas dear. Old man like you should’ve brought help along, ’stead of trying to sneak after me all alone. You’re just too brave for your—”

Ranvyas raised his fist; Hef broke off in an angry mutter.

“There have been human monsters in these mountains worse than this carrion-eater,” the abbot said.

“Oh? Do you know this region, eminence?” asked the innkeeper, who had joined them at the fire.

“Only from my learning. I dare say that the old provinces of the Halbros kings have figured so prominently in our history and literature that all of us know some tale of their mountains—though we are all strangers here.”

He glanced around at the others. “Perhaps you observed the stone ruins that crest the ridge along the gap ahead. Quite striking against the sunset, I thought. That was the fortress from which Kane held these mountains in thrall for a hundred years. He ruled the land with a bloody fist, exacted tribute from all who passed through, fought back every expedition led against him. Some say he had made a pact with the forces of evil by which they granted him eternal youth and victory in return for the innocent blood he sacrificed each dark of the moon.

“For a while he aided Halbros-Serrantho in the imperial wars, but even the great emperor sickened of Kane’s depravity and finally used the combined armies of the new empire to pull the tyrant’s citadel down on his head. They say his evil ghost haunts the ruins to this day.”

“A tale somewhat garbled by popular superstition,” Claesna remarked. “Actually the legend of Kane has far darker implications. His name, I have observed, reappears in all ages and all lands. The literature of the occult recurrently alludes to him. In fact, there is an ancient compendium of prehuman glyphics that Kane is said to have authored. If it exists, I’d give a fortune to read it.”

“A rather long-lived villain, this Kane,” said Passlo drily .

“Some occult authors contend that Kane was one of the first true men, damned to eternal wandering for some dark act of rebellion against mankind’s creator.”

“I doubt Thoem would have damned a blasphemer to immortality,” scoffed the abbot. “Doubtless his legend appeals to certain evil types who take his name for their own.”

“Then they steal his physical appearance, as well,” Claesna countered. “Legend describes him as a man of powerful build, seemingly a warrior in his prime years. His hair is red and he is left-handed.”

“So are many others.”

“But his eyes are his mark. The eyes of Kane are blue, and in them glows the mad gaze of a ruthless killer. No man may look into Kane’s eyes and not know him.”

Ranvyas started. “There’s talk of an assassin who’s behind these murders that are pushing the empire into civil war. Said to be an outlander brought in by Eypurin to remove those who oppose his false claim to the throne. His name is reportedly Kane, and what little is known of him answers to your description. Did this Kane die in the fall of his citadel?”

Passlo looked startled. “Why, of course... I suppose. Yes, he must have. That was centuries ago, man!”

“I had been warned against staying the night in the open,” suggested the priest. “While nothing definite was said, I can see that these mountains have more sinister legends than the road has turns.”

“That’s so, Revered Callistratis,” affirmed the ranger, running a hand over his short-cropped hair. “You say you lost your horse on the trail? Lucky for you you didn’t meet Valdese while you was limping along in the dark.”

“Valdese?”

“A lamia, reverence,” explained the innkeeper. “A most beautiful spectre, Valdese is—and most malevolent. Legend says she haunts the mountain trails at night. Entices travellers into her arms and leaves them bloodless beneath the moon.”

Suddenly it had grown very quiet. Leaves rustled against the frosted windowpanes.

The innkeeper sensed the unease of his guests. “Had you not heard that legend, gentlemen? But I forget—you’re strangers here, all of you. Still I thought you must have heard her song. Do you know the Song of Valdese?” He raised a black-gloved hand. “Come out, Bodger. Sing Valdese’s song for our guests.”

The dwarf scuttled out of the shadow with his mandolin. Bowing to his audience, he began to sing, his voice comic no longer.

In the dark hills of Halbros’ land,

There dwelled a lovely maid—

The brightest flower, the rarest jewel,

Shone dull in Valdese’s hand.

Her father’s inn stood beside the road,

Great was his wealth of gold—

But the choicest treasure of the land,

Was the heart of fair Valdese.

Then came brash suitors to her door,

Six bright and bold young men—

Said they had come to win the hand,
Of the maiden called Valdese.

“Sirs,” she said, “don’t think me cruel,
For I love another youth—
He must be gone for seven long years,
To study in a hidden school.”

And when she told them the suitors laughed,
“Oh, your beauty is not for him—
Choose instead from one of our band,
And not some wizard’s fool.”

Then came her lover in a cloak of grey,
Returning from the hidden school—
Said, “I’ve been gone these seven long years,
Now I’ve come for the love of Valdese.”

“Oh no,” swore the suitors in jealousy,
“You’ll not steal our prize”—
And with cruel knives they took his life,
And the heart of Valdese after.

Now Valdese lies in the cold, cold ground,
And her spirit haunts these hills—

But her lover was sworn in the Grey Lord's name,

To serve seven times seven years.

"That's terrifying!" breathed Dordron, when the dwarf stopped singing. "So uncanny an ending, that last verse!"

"Perhaps the last verse hasn't been written," the innkeeper suggested. "Bodger, see how things are upstairs. It's grown strangely quiet up there."

"Well, at least we servants of Thoem have nothing to fear from lamiae!" muttered the abbot stoutly. "Do we not, Revered Callistratis?"

"To be certain, eminence," the priest assured him. "Thoem protects his servants from all creatures of evil."

Passlo suddenly drew a crystal-hilted dagger from the folds of his cassock. "And for added protection in these shadow-haunted hills I carry with me this sacred blade. It was shaped from star-metal by priests long dead, and the runes on its blade give it power over evil's foul servants." He did not add that he had stolen the blade from the abbey vaults.

"Seven years in a hidden school," mused the priest. "That can only mean one thing."

Claesna nodded. "He was apprenticed to the cult of the Seven Nameless—and sworn to the Grey Lord."

"Thoem grant that we someday see the extinction of that black cult of devil worshippers!" growled Passlo.

"The cult is far older than your own religion," Claesna informed him. "And it isn't devil worship, strictly speaking."

"Well, they're devils they worship!" Jarcos said shrilly.

"No. The Seven Nameless are elder gods. Or 'protogods,' more accurately, since they exist beyond the ordered universe of good and evil forces. Their realm is one of timeless chaos, a limbo of unformed creation and ultimate dissolution—opposite forces that somehow exist simultaneously."

Claesna preened his beard. "Their entire worship is structured on the energy of opposing systems. Little is known of the cult, since its devotees worship in secret. New initiates must study seven years in a 'hidden school' to master the secret powers of the cult; then each is sworn to one of the Seven for the space of forty-nine years. The names of the Seven are secret, for should the uninitiate utter them he would evoke the god without having power over him. A rather hideous fate, it's said. Korjonos was sworn to the Grey Lord, who is the most feared of the Seven."

"Korjonos? Was that the young wizard's name?" the priest inquired.

Claesna bit his pipestem testily. "Yes, I believe so. After all, the ballad was based on true events. Happened a century ago, I believe."

“Not at all,” corrected the innkeeper. “Not quite fifty years ago. And very near here.”

“Indeed?” Dordron’s voice was strained.

“In fact, at this very inn.”

The eyes of the travellers bored back into their host’s smiling face.

“Why, yes. But I forgot you gentlemen are strangers here. Would you like to know the story behind Valdese’s song?”

No one spoke. He went on as if there were no tension in the room.

“Valdese and Korjonos were childhood lovers. She was the daughter of one of the richest men in Halbroson, while he was the son of a servant at his inn. They were both barely past ten when Korjonos was orphaned. Penniless, he left the inn to study at a hidden school and vowed to return for her in seven years, with the wealth and power that his wisdom would bring him.

“Valdese waited for him. But there were others. Six coarse young louts from the settlements close by. They lusted for her beauty, and more for the gold she would inherit. Valdese would not have them, but they argued and waited, for the time was near when Korjonos had promised to return.

“And after seven years he did return. To their brutish anger, Valdese’s love for the young wizard had not diminished with time. They were married that night at her father’s inn.

“But hate was black in the hearts of her rejected suitors, and they drank long into the night.”

A log burst apart in a shower of sparks, cast light over the circle of nervous faces.

“The guests were gone; her father they slew with the few others who were there. They took his gold, and they dragged the lovers from their wedding chamber.

“They hung Korjonos between two trees. Valdese they threw to the ground.

“ ‘He’ll not curse us,’ said one, and they cut out his tongue.

“ ‘He’ll not cast spells against us,’ said another; and they cut off his hands.

“ ‘Nor seek to follow after us,’ and they cut off his feet.

“Then they cut away his manhood and told her, ‘He’s not fit to lie with.’

“And they cut away his face and told her, ‘He’s not fit to look at.’

“But they spared him his eyes so that he might watch what they did to her, and they spared him his ears so he might listen to her screams.

“When they were finished... she died. Korjonos they left hanging. Then they divided the gold and fled, each choosing a separate path to follow. And while the infamy of their deed shamed the land, not one of them was ever punished.”

“Korjonos?” asked the priest

“Did not die. He was sworn to the Grey Lord for seven times seven years, and death could not claim him. His familiar demon cut him down and carried him away. And the rage of the sorcerer waited years upon painful years for fitting vengeance to transpire.”

A chair crashed as Claesna leaped to his feet. “Gods! Don’t you see? It’s been near fifty years, and our faces and names were otherwise! But I thought several of your faces seemed familiar to me! Don’t deny it! It’s no coincidence that all six of us have returned to this inn tonight! Sorcery has drawn us here! But who...?”

The innkeeper smiled in secret mirth as their startled voices shouted in protest. He crossed over to in front of the fire. Still smiling, he peeled off the black gloves.

And they saw what manner of hands were grafted to his wrists.

With these hands he dug at the flesh of his face.

The smiling lips peeled away with the rest, and they saw the noseless horror that had been a face, saw the black reptilian tongue that lashed between broken teeth.

They sat frozen in shock. The dwarf entered unnoticed, a tiny corpse in his hairy hands.

“Stillborn, master,” he snickered, holding by its heels the blue-skinned infant. “Strangled by her cord, and the mother died giving forth.” He stepped into the center of their circle.

Then the chill of the autumn night bore down upon them, a chill greater than that of any natural darkness.

“Seven years time seven,” hissed Korjonos. “So long have I plotted for this. I’ve shaped your lives from the day of your crime, let you fatten like cattle, let you live for the day when you would pay as no man has ever paid!

“Callistratis,” he called aside, “this isn’t for you! I don’t know how you came here, but go now if you still can.”

Faces set in fear, they stared at the wizard. Invisible bonds held them in their places about the circle.

Korjonos chanted and gestured. “Holy man, evil man. Wise man, fool. Brave man, coward. Six corners of the heptagon, and I, a dead man who lives, make the seventh. Contradicting opposites that invoke the chaos lords—and the final paradox is the focus of the spell: an innocent soul who has never lived, a damned soul who can never die!

“Seven times seven years have passed, and when the Grey Lord comes for me, you six shall follow into his realm!”

Suddenly Ranvyas sprang to life. “The dagger!”

The abbot stared dumbly, then fumbled at his cassock. He seemed to move at a dreamlike pace.

Hissing in rage, Korjonos rushed into the incantation.

Passlo clumsily extended the dagger, but the ranger was faster.

Tearing the dagger from Passlo's trembling fingers, he hurled it at the grinning dwarf.

Bodger shrieked and dropped the stillborn infant. Reeking smoke boiled from his chest where the crystal hilt protruded. He reeled, seemed to sag inward upon himself, like a collapsing coat of mail. Then there was only a charred greasy smear, a pile of filthy clothes—and a hairy spider that scurried away to vanish through a chink in the wall.

“Well done, Ranvyas!” Claesna gasped shakily. “You’ve slain his familiar, and the spell is shattered!”

He sneered at the wizard. “Unless, of course, you’ve another ‘damned soul who cannot die’ who can complete your incantation.”

Korjonos's bowed shoulders signalled his defeat.

“Let’s get out of here!” blubbered Jarcos. His brother was weeping mindlessly.

“Not until we slay the wizard,” growled Ranvyas.

“And set me free,” Hef advised. “I don’t think you’ll want me to tell them in Rader about my five old comrades.”

“Thoem! It’s cold!” chattered Passlo. “And what’s wrong with the light in here?”

The priest broke into their circle and bent over the pile of seared clothing. They thought he meant to retrieve the enchanted dagger, but when he straightened he held the stillborn child in his left hand.

His cowl fell back. They saw his red hair.

They saw his eyes.

“Kane!” screamed Claesna.

Korjonos shouted out syllables that formed another name.

Hands went for futile swordhilts, but already the room was heavy with the sweet dust stench of ancient decay.

At the doorway behind them the bolt snapped with rust; boards rotted and sagged, crumbled into powdery dissolution. They stared in dread understanding. On the threshold stood a tall figure in a tattered cloak of grey.

Kane turned his face.

And the Grey Lord lifted his mask.

Kane shook the darkness from his mind. He started to come to his feet, then almost fell because he already stood.

He was standing in the gutted interior of a log building. The floor overhead had collapsed, as had the roof, and he could see stars in the night sky. Small trees snagged up through the rotting debris. The inn had been abandoned for many years.

The air was musty with decay. He stumbled for the doorway, thought he heard the snap of dry bones beneath his boots. Outside he breathed raggedly and glanced again at the sky.

The mist crawled in wild patterns across the stars. And Kane saw a wraithlike figure of grey, his cloak flapping in the night winds. Behind him seemed to follow seven more wraiths, dragging their feet as if they would not follow.

Then another phantom. A girl in a long dress, racing after. She caught the seventh follower by the hand. Strained, then drew him away. The Grey Lord and those who must follow vanished into the night skies. The girl and her lover fell back in an embrace—then melted as one into the mist.

Kane's horse was waiting outside the ruined inn. Kane was not surprised, for he had recognized the girl in the mist. His heels touched the horse's flanks, and Kane vanished into the mist as well.

RAVEN'S EYRIE

Prologue

The child awoke at the sound of her own scream. A thin scream, imbued with the fever that parched her throat. And still a scream tight with the terror of her dream. Its echo hung on the bare-timbered walls of her narrow room as she bolted from her damp pillow.

Her fever-bright eyes stared wide with fear as they darted about the room's shadowy corners. But the phantoms of her nightmare, if nightmare it was, had receded. Klesst brushed the clinging tendrils of red hair from her moist forehead and sat up.

Through the greenish bull's-eye glass of her lattice window she could see the declining sun, impaled upon the reddened fangs of the mountains. The late autumn night would close quickly, and the darkness of her nightmare would surround her. And this was the night when the Demonlord walked the earth...

Shivering despite her heightened temperature, Klesst dropped back against the straw mattress. “Mother!” she called plaintively, wondering why her outcry had not brought someone to her side.

“Mother!” she called again. She longed to call Greshha’s name, but remembered that the stout serving woman had been sent away from the inn for the night. Greshha had not wanted to leave her. Not when she was sick, not on the night of her birthday. Not on *this* night. It was cruel of her mother to send her away, Greshha whom she looked upon as her nurse. Smiling Greshha, Greshha of warm hands and soft bosom. Not hard and cold like Mother.

Greshha would have answered her cry. It was cruel of Mother to ignore her like this.

“What is it, Klesst?” Mother’s frown regarded her warily from the doorway. She had heard no footsteps on the thick boards of the long hallway. Mother moved so silently always.

“I’m thirsty, Mother. My throat feels so hot. Please bring me some water.”

How pretty Mother was... Her long black hair brushed down the sides of her face, clasped at her nape, and let fall over her shoulder and down her left breast. Under her shawl, her straight shoulders rose bare from her wide-necked blouse of bleached muslin, full-sleeved and gathered at her wrists. Her narrow waist was cinched by a wide belt of dark leather, crisscrossed with scarlet cord. Her skirt of brown wool fell in wide pleats to low on her calves, and her small feet were shod in buskins of soft leather. Klesst wore gold circlets pierced through each earlobe—just like Mother—but Greshha had helped her sew bits of embroidery on her garments, while Mother’s were unadorned.

Her mother crossed the tiny room with her quick stride. She caught up the crockery pitcher from the stand beside Klesst’s bed, then frowned as it sloshed. “There’s water here, Klesst. Why can’t you get your own drink?”

Klesst hoped she had not triggered her mother’s cold anger. Not when loneliness shadowed her room, and the night was closing over the inn. “The pitcher is so heavy, and my arms feel so weak and shaky. Please, Mother. Give me some water.”

Silently her mother poured water into Klesst’s cup and placed the blue glazed mug in her hands. Greshha would have held it to her lips, supported her head with her strong arm...

Klesst drank thirstily, gripping the cup with both her hands—surprisingly long-fingered for a child’s hands. Her great blue eyes watched her mother over the brim, searching her face for anger, impatience. Mother’s face was impassive.

The child’s febrile lips sucked noisily at the last swallow of water, and her mother took the empty cup from her fingers. She returned it to its place beside the pitcher, then turned to go.

“Please, Mother!” Klesst spoke quickly. “My head—it burns so. Could you place something cool on my head?”

Her mother laid her thin hand over the girl’s brow. *Yes, that was so cold...*

“I had the bad dreams again, Mother,” whispered Klesst, hoping her mother would not leave.

“You have a fever still. Fever brings bad dreams.”

“It was that same nightmare.”

Mother’s eyes were wary. “What nightmare, Klesst?”

Would she get angry? Might she stay beside her if she knew her fear? Klesst dreaded the thought of being alone in the darkness.

“It was the dog again, Mother. The great black hound.”

Her mother drew back and folded her long arms under her high breasts. “A great black hound?” she said. “Do you mean a wolf?”

“A giant hound, Mother. Bigger than the bear hounds, bigger than a wolf. I think he’s even bigger than a bear. And he’s black, all black, even his chops and his tongue. Just his fangs are white. And his eyes—they burn like fire. He wants me, Mother. In my dream I see him hunting along the ridges in the mist, sniffing the night winds for my scent, And I can’t run, but he keeps hunting closer—until he’s snuffling up to the inn. Then he sees me, and his eyes glow red and freeze me so I can’t scream, and his jaws yawn open and I see smoke cutting from his fangs...”

“Hush! It’s only a bad dream!” Her mother’s voice was strained.

Klesst shuddered as the memory of her fear crept back again, and she wished Greshha were here to hold her. “And I can see something else walking the ridges. There’s a man, all in black with a great black cloak that flaps behind him. A man who hunts with the black hound. I can’t see him clear because the night hides him—but I know I mustn’t look at his face!”

“Stop it!”

The child gasped and looked wonderingly at her mother.

“Talking about it will only make you have the bad dream again,” her mother explained tensely.

Klesst decided not to mention the other strange man who walked through her nightmare. “Why are they hunting for me?” she asked in a frightened whisper. *Dared she ask Mother to stay with her?* She again glanced to see if she were angry,

Her mother’s face was shadowed, her lips tight and pale. She spoke in a whisper, as if thinking aloud. “Sometimes when your soul is so torn with pain and hatred... it can burn you out inside, so your spirit can never feel anything else... and you can think thoughts that are different, turn to paths that you wouldn’t... before. And later maybe your soul is burned out and cold... But the fire of your hatred smoulders and waits... And you know there’s a bad moon rising—but there’s no way to hold it back.”

A gust of wind rattled dry leaves against the panes. Outside the lattice window, night was striding over the autumnal ridges.

I. Ridges of Autumn

“How is he?”

Braddeyas shrugged. “Alive, I think, but that’s about all. He’ll be dead by morning if we don’t stop soon.”

Weed spat sourly and nudged his horse alongside the wounded man’s mount. The man slumped over his horse’s neck was huge, but his thick muscled frame was now nerveless, and only the ropes which held him to his saddle kept him from toppling to the mountain trail.

Knotted his fingers in the thick red hair, Weed lifted his head. “Kane! Can you hear me?”

The blood-smeared face was slack and pale, the eyes hidden under half-closed lids. His lips moved silently, but Weed could not tell whether there was recognition.

“Then again, he may not last the night even if we do stop somewhere,” Braddeyas commented. “Fever’s getting worse, I’d say.”

“Kane!”

No response.

“He’s been out of it since the fever set in,” Braddeyas went on. “And he’s lost a lot of blood—still losing some.” Absently he scratched the dirty bandages that bound his own hairy forearm. Signs of recent and desperate combat marked each man of their small band.

“I don’t like to stop,” frowned Weed, assuming Kane’s leadership. “They’re too close on us to risk it.”

Braddeyas drew his cloak tighter about his narrow shoulders. “Kane won’t last till morning unless we rest.”

“Pleddis won’t push on through these mountains tonight,” offered Darros, who had ridden back to join them. “Why won’t he?” Weed demanded. “He must know we’re only hours ahead of him. The bastard’s probably counting his bounty money right now!”

The dark-bearded crossbowman shook his head decisively. “Then he’ll be counting it beside a roaring fire. You won’t find nobody riding these trails tonight. Not with this moon. A man will risk his life for gold maybe, but not his soul.”

Weed glanced toward the rising moon in sudden awareness. The long-limbed bandit was from the island Pellin, and not a native of Lartroxia. Nonetheless, years of raiding along the continent’s hinterlands had made him familiar with the tales and legends of the Myceum Mountains. He looked at the red moon of autumn and remembered.

“The Demonlord’s Moon,” he whispered.

“Pleddis will have to make camp,” Darros asserted. “His men won’t ride past nightfall. He’ll have to wait for dawn before he takes up our trail again.”

“We can risk a halt, then,” Weed surmised.

“We’ve no choice,” commented Darros, his jaw set.

The two remaining members of their band, tall Frassos and crop-eared Seth, proclaimed agreement by their grimfaced silence.

“By the red moon of autumn, the Demonlord bunts;
His black hound beside him, lie seeks along the ridges,
Hunting blood for demonhound, souls for Demonlord...”

“Shut up, Braddeyas!” growled Weed, his ragged nerves overstrung by the creeping sense of fear.

“We ain’t going to make camp along the trail, are we?” mumbled Seth uneasily. “Kane’s just dead weight, and that’s only five of us to wait through the night.”

“Any other ideas?” demanded Weed. “Night’s coming on fast.”

Kane’s head did not lift from where he slumped against his horse’s neck, but his voice slurred thickly: “Raven’s Eyrie.”

“What’d he say?” Weed asked.

“Raven’s Eyrie,” answered Braddeyas, bending close to Kane. He held water to their leader’s cracked lips, then shook his head. “Still unconscious. Like he’s saving up what strength he has. I’ve seen him do this before.”

“Any idea what he meant?”

“Raven’s Eyrie is an inn not far, maybe two miles from here,” explained Darros, who knew the region well. “It overlooks the River Cotras and the road that runs along the river gorge. Used to be a major caravanserai, before Kane raided it years back. They never rebuilt the place, and my guess is it’s all in ruins now.”

Weed nodded. “Yeah, I remember Kane talking about that raid. Must have been about eight years back, because it happened just before I joined Kane.”

“I was there,” stated Braddeyas with crusty pride. He had raided these mountains even before Kane had come to them ten years before. His hair was grey-streaked and thinning now, which said something about the man, for the mountain outlaws seldom died in bed.

All too true for the others of Kane’s once powerful band—men cut to pieces by mercenary swords when Pleddis encircled their camp. This handful had slashed their way through his trap, but three days of desperate flight still found the free-captain close on their heels. Nor was he likely to quit their trail. The Combine cities of Lartroxia’s coastal plain had set a high bounty on Kane, and Pleddis meant to claim it.

“If its walls are standing, the inn will give us shelter until dawn,” Frassos pointed out. He coughed thinly,

wincing as pain shot through cracked ribs.

“You know the way, Darros, then lead us there,” Weed decided. “Daylight’s just about gone.”

“It is that,” someone muttered.

Night was closing over the mountains on great raven’s wings. Shadow lay deep beneath the blue-grey pines and frost-fired hardwoods which shouldered over the narrow trail. Darkness hungrily swallowed the valleys and hollows that spread out below them—pools of gloom from which waves of mist rose to storm the wooded slopes and pour over the limestone ridges.

A battered, gut-weary handful of hunted men—ruthless, half-wild outlaws hounded by killers as remorseless as themselves. Shivering in their dirt and blood-caked bandages, they rode on in grim determination, thoughts numb to pain and fear—although both phantoms rode beside them—intent on nothing more than the deadly necessity of flight. Flight from the hired bounty killers who followed almost on the sound of their hoofbeats.

They were well mounted; their gear was chosen from the plunder of uncounted raids. But now their horses stumbled with fatigue, their gear was worn and travel-stained, their weapons notched and dulled from hard fighting. They were the last. The last on this side of Hell of those who had ridden behind Kane, as feared and daring an outlaw pack as had ever roamed the Myceum Mountains.

No more would they set upon travellers along the lonely mountain passes, pillage merchants’ camps, terrorize isolated settlements. Never again would they sweep down from the dark-pined slopes and lay waste to villages of the coastal plains, then dart back into the secret fastness of the mountains where the Combine’s cavalry dared not venture. Their comrades were dead, fed ravens in a forgotten valley countless twisted miles behind their bent shoulders. Their leader, whose infamous cunning and deadly sword at last had failed them, was dying in his saddle.

They were all dead men.

And night was upon them.

“Thoem! It’s dark as the inside of a tomb!” cursed Weed, trying to follow the shadow-hidden trail. He glanced uneasily at the blood-hued disk rising above the ridges of autumn. The moon cast no light this night.

“We’re almost there,” Darros promised him from the darkness ahead.

Moments later the trail rose over a gap, and he called back, “There it is! And there’s lights! The inn hasn’t been deserted, after all.”

Not quite, Weed observed. Even in the thick gloom, he could see that Raven’s Eyrie lay half in ruins.

The grey stone and black timber structure crouched on the edge of the deep valley below them, rising from a bluff overlooking the River Cotras. By the dim-eyed rows of windows, Weed noted that the main building of the sprawling caravanserai stood at least three storeys. The outlying wings of the inn appeared no more than fire-gutted walls. River mist hung over the blackened walls of Raven's Eyrie, and in the darkness below the limestone bluff, the Cotras thundered its unseen rush to the western coast.

Cautiously they urged their exhausted mounts down the twisting path that descended the ridge from the gap. The last grey ghost of twilight died away as they emerged from the pine-buried slope and reached the river road. Though wider than the path they had been following, the river road showed signs of neglect. New saplings speared through its hoof-beaten surface, and older trees reached out from the looming forest on either side. Men and horses had ridden by, and smaller hoofprints marked the passage of an occasional drover, but wagon ruts were few, and these old and eroded. Weed reflected that the depredations of Kane and his men probably explained the near abandonment of this once heavily travelled trace.

In darkness they approached the inn. Only a few of the outbuildings remained standing, but they could catch the smell and soft noises of horses and livestock. Several lighted windows of bull's-eye glass stared dimly toward the road. A pair of smoky lanterns hung beside the front entrance, but the thick timbered door had the look of being bolted. A wooden sign hung out above the lanterns, swinging slightly, though the wind was less raking here in the valley. Its paint was charred, and the panel bore blade scars, but Weed could make out the blocky Lartroxian letters: "Raven's Eyrie." On the sign above the letters perched a huge raven, in bas-relief and painted black. Someone had set a bit of red glass into the bird's eye, and lamplight glinted there. The raven seemed to watch their approach.

"How many would you say?" Weed asked Darros, after the other had ridden ahead for a closer look.

"Not very many, by all signs," the crossbowman replied. "Looks like just a few people are keeping the inn going. Them and maybe a few travellers, I'd guess. Strange their dogs haven't scented us."

"Shouldn't be much trouble, then." Weed turned in the darkness to give orders. Frassos did not respond when he called his name.

"Frassos?" he called again.

No reply. His riderless horse wandered forward instead.

They conferred in startled bewilderment. Frassos had ridden behind, guarding their rear. No one had heard him cry out; no one had heard the sound of a fall.

"We're all of us done in twice over," suggested Braddeyas. "Maybe he passed out and fell."

"We should have heard him if he did," Weed pointed out.

"Should we go back and look for him?"

The red moon burned down on them from the misty ridges. Weed shivered under its rusty glow, remembering the mountain legends he had heard of this night.

"Does anyone want the job?"

It was too dark to see their eyes, but Weed sensed that no one met his face.

“If Frassos is all right, he can catch up to us at the inn,” muttered Seth. There was no confidence in his voice.

II. A Guest Returns

For the space of a dream, Klesst drifted in the restless sleep of fever. Shaken from her half-sleep by sudden angry stridor, she flung herself free of covers in frightened awakening.

The moon’s burning eye stared at her through the rippled panes of her window, and Klesst threw her hand to her lips to stifle air outcry. From below in the inn, angry shouts, splintering clamour of overturned benches, a raw scream of pain.

Had the black hound at last found her? Had it broken past the door? Was it even now climbing the stairs to her room?

But the angry voices continued. The words were indistinct to her, but their tone was clear. Now more curious than afraid, Klesst decided she must see what had happened.

Dizzily she dropped her feet to the floor and held fast to the oak bedstead until steadiness returned to hot limbs. The night’s chill pierced her thin cotton shift, and she hurriedly wound about her shoulders the woolen coverlet Greshha had woven for her. For the moment, her fever had left her, and though suddenly cold, she felt a certain shaky strength in its wake. Her teeth chattered; the fire in her room had almost died, and no one had filled the woodbox.

The angry shouts had subsided by the time Klesst tiptoed down the narrow hallway to the balcony overlooking the inn’s common room. Cautiously she crept through the shadows to the pine log railing and peered from behind a gnarled post.

She darted back in fear—then, certain that the shadows concealed her, risked a longer glance. Her eyes grew wide with a child’s wondering stare.

The front door of the inn was flung open. Cold gusts slanted the lantern flames, spun curled leaves across the threshold. Strangers—wild, dangerous men—had burst into Raven’s Eyrie. Death had entered with them.

A burly, black-bearded man held a cocked crossbow; his eyes searched the shadows of the common room and raked the balcony where Klesst crouched closer to the log railing. Another man with gangling limbs and mousy, straw-colored hair brandished a narrow blade of unusual length. He seemed to be in charge, for he snarled commands to someone outside the inn.

The inhabitants of the inn and its few guests stood frozen against the long bar. There was Mother, her expression unreadable, with Selle, the scrawny serving maid, cowering against her. Pot-bellied Cholos, who served her mother as tapster, licked his lips nervously and glanced sidelong at the hulking Mauderas, who kept the stables and saw to such heavy work as was ever done at Raven’s Eyrie. Mauderas’s eyes were sullen as he pressed a hand to his crimson-sodden sleeve. Two guests, apparently drovers, were

backed against the bar as well. Another guest, whose green tunic identified him as a ranger, lay crumpled beside an overturned table, a crossbow bolt through his back.

Bandits! Klesst realized with a shudder, recalling the many lurid tales she had listened in on, safely crouched by the corner of the fireplace. The murderous outlaws who held sway over the mountain wilderness—who had laid waste to Raven’s Eyrie one awful night before her birth.

There was a disturbance at the door. Two more bandits appeared, staggering under the burden of a third man. One was a wiry figure, partially bald and gap-toothed, though his hair was barely greyed. The other was a husky, swarthy-faced tough with cropped ears and battered nose. The man they shouldered between them was as large as the two together. His clothes were filthy with dirt and caked blood; matted red hair hung over his bearded, brutal face. Klesst remembered the stories she had heard of ogres and trolls that were said to haunt the mountains, lairing in hidden caves and creeping forth at night to pull down travellers and steal little girls from their beds. Klesst had thought the big man unconscious. But as the outlaws supported him into the room, his knees suddenly straightened, and she heard him say, “I’ll sit over there.”

Somewhat impatiently he pulled free of their grasp and half fell onto a low-backed oak chair next to the fire. The crop-eared bandit righted the overturned table and shoved it before him, while the blond procured a thick bottle of brandy from the trembling Cholos and crossed the room. The red-haired giant mutely accepted the bottle and tilted it to his lips for a long swallow. When he thudded it to the table, the dark green glass was empty to half its depth.

Gingerly he brushed the tangled strands of hair from his face and settled his wolfskin cloak about his shoulders, his manner at once domineering. Fresh blood soaked crude bandages along the slashed side of his leather hauberk, and a crusted wound on his scalp had streaked his face with dried blood. Beneath the rust of beard and caked gore, his face was white with fever.

His eyes seemed to glow with a strange blue light by the fire. Perhaps it was the fever. Almost casually his gaze wandered about the room, touched the shadowed balcony where Klesst crouched. For an instant his eyes met hers, and Klesst froze with fear. There was something unnatural about his eyes, she instantly realized—and something familiar. But while he must have seen her, his gaze did not pause in its quick surveillance of the common room.

Instead, his stare halted on her mother’s face. Thoughtfully he studied her, as if searching for a memory.

“Good evening, Ionor,” he greeted her then.

Mother’s lips were a tight line, and Klesst could sense the tension in her unsmiling face. “Hello, Kane,” she whispered, and quickly turned her eyes from his stare.

Klesst sucked in her breath, recognizing Kane from the countless tales she had overheard of the dread bandit leader. No wonder they stood frozen in fear at the bar...

Then she heard Kane ask, “Weed, did you check to see if there was anyone else in the upstairs rooms—other than that kid up there by the railing?”

The lanky blond outlaw started to reply, “Just checked the outbuildings so far—going to search the inn right now. They said there wasn’t anybody else here...”

“Be certain,” ordered Kane. “And stick that kid in bed.”

But Klesst had already fled to her room.

“How are you feeling?” asked Weed, more than a little surprised that Kane had regained consciousness. But then there always seemed to burn some last reserve of strength within his huge body.

Kane grunted noncommittally. “Damn fever comes and goes. Hard to know where I am part of the time. Could swear I wasn’t wounded that bad—unless that quarrel was poisoned.”

“Ought to have Braddeyas clean that hole in your side, Put on a fresh dressing. Likely it’s all festered along your ribs.”

“Later, maybe. Don’t want to start it bleeding again.” Kane rubbed his forehead wearily, wiping away dried blood and greasy trickles of sweat. “Feel stronger once I get some food down, catch some sleep. Can’t spare more than a few hours—Pleddis can’t be far back.”

“Figure we can risk it here till dawn. Darros says Pleddis will have to camp. Demonlord’s Moon tonight.” Weed paused, then added: “We lost Frassos coming down the ridge.”

“No point looking for him,” Kane concluded simply. “Not this night.”

Seth came stomping down from the rooms overhead. “Nobody else here,” he reported. “Just a skinny girl, and I locked her in her room. Second floor’s pretty near empty, but there’s a big room with a fire going on the third.”

Kane nodded. It was hard to concentrate, and he could feel his strength ebbing once more. “Put a guard where he can watch outside, Weed,” he ordered. “Another man stay awake to watch things here. There’s a big storeroom past the kitchen there. Tie the men and lock them inside it—no point killing them if they stay in line. Toss that body in with them.

“Leave the women out to clean up this mess. Doubt if anyone else will come along tonight, but if they do, we don’t need to give alarm the instant they walk in. Then they can put together some food for us. Watch them closely, though.”

His eyes returned to Ionor’s drawn face. “But you wouldn’t try to poison me, would you, Ionor?”

“It’s a cleaner death than I’d wish for you, Kane,” came her strained reply.

“Bring me another bottle,” Kane told her mockingly. “And one of those hens I smell roasting.” Grudgingly she complied. Kane watched the sway of her body as she stiffly came toward him; memory of her drew his lips in a cold smile.

“Sit down,” he said. Since it was not an invitation, Ioner sat down across from him, taking the chair his boot dragged forward.

“Are your memories so bitter, Ionor?”

Her voice was cold, drained of anger—deceptive, for hate edged its timbre. “You and your bandits raided my father’s inn, slaughtered our guests, murdered my family, looted and set fire to Raven’s Eyrie. You gave my younger sisters to your men to rape until death was a mercy! I could hear their screams even as you had your way with me. I can still hear them. No, Kane! Bitter is too sweet a word for the memories I have of you!”

No emotion touched Kane’s pallid face. “Shouldn’t have run off on me like you did,” he said, dividing the roasted fowl with curious delicacy. “I could have made you forget that night.”

His eyes seemed to wander from focus, and Ionor smiled inwardly to see the fever that racked his giant body. “Nothing will ever erase that night!” she whispered.

A rough hand squeezed her shoulder and drew her from her seat. “Bring food for us,” growled Seth, his mouth stuffed with meat he had scooped up from the dead ranger’s plate.

“We’ll talk more later, perhaps,” Kane called after her. Her shoulders tensed, but she made no reply.

“Want some opium?” queried Braddeyas, once they had secured the men in the storeroom. “It’ll take the sting out of your side to where you can sleep good. You’ll need your strength.”

“I can sleep,” mumbled Kane, swallowing a mouthful of brandy. “Don’t want to dull my wits, with Pleddis likely to catch us before the next ridge.” His chin declined slowly toward his chest.

Then he jerked his head erect and stared fiercely about him. “Bring my sword from my saddle!” he demanded. “Pleddis on our necks, and I sit here like a besotted lord at his wedding feast. This is no time to sleep! Fix me a pipe to hold me awake.”

Weed signed insistently to Braddeyas, and the broken-toothed outlaw began to fill a pipe with coarse tobacco, secretly stuffing a large crumb of opium into the bottom of the bowl. He lit the pipe with a wood splinter and handed it to Kane.

Darros reappeared at the door, carrying Kane’s long sword in one hand, while he hastily drew the bolt with his other. “Thoem! I don’t like that mist!” he muttered, not voicing his true thoughts.

Kane took the strangely-hilted blade from him and rested the scabbard against his leg. His fingers touched it, sensed its strength. Steel knew neither pain nor exhaustion, and its only fever was the warmth of an enemy’s blood. Kane wished such unfeeling strength were his, for he was desperately tired, and he dared not rest. His vision blurred and cleared with the throbbing of his skull. “I’ve gone into battle in worse shape than this,” he said defiantly, drawing at the harsh smoke that passed so easily into his lungs.

When the pipe was out, Weed took it from his relaxed fingers. Kane’s slumped head did not lift from his chest; his breathing was slow and regular, his eyes closed.

“He’ll rest better like this,” explained Weed. “Let’s get him to a bed. Did you say there was a place ready upstairs?”

Staggering under Kane’s weight, Seth and Darros hauled their unconscious leader up the narrow stairway to the inn’s topmost floor. There a common room had been prepared for several of the guests; a fire burned on its hearth, and a straw-ticked bed was covered with a quilted blanket. They stretched Kane across the bed and threw the quilt over him.

“Go on and get some rest,” advised Weed. “Braddeyas and I will take first watch.”

He waited until they had quit the chamber, then bent over Kane’s ear. “Kane,” he whispered, “Kane, can you bear me?”

Kane made a noise in his throat that might not have signified anything.

Frowning, Weed bent closer. “Where did you hide it, Kane? Remember? You always cached part of your share of the loot. Where did you take it, Kane? You can tell me, Kane. I’m your friend. We’ll find your cache and use it to escape. We can live like lords in some other land. Where is it, Kane?”

But the other man seemed too deep in sleep.

Sadly Weed rose from his side. “At least don’t die and leave all that gold to rot,” he begged.

Opening the lattice window a few inches—for the room was warm, and Weed feared this would increase Kane’s fever—he wearily left to join Braddeyas.

III. Ravens Fly by Night

A shower of sparks started up from the fire and disappeared into the black cavern of the chimney. Weed grunted and shoved again with the poker, wedging the new logs closer to their charred predecessors. Perhaps the fire would burn brighter now. The huge fireplace of limestone blocks occupied most of one end of the common room. It should have warmed the entire area; instead its flames crawled dispiritedly over the smouldering logs, and an unseasonal chill for autumn crept through the room.

Wiping his hands, he turned from the hearth to gaze once more through the window. Though the full moon was rising higher above the ridges, thick mist rolled from the Cotras to cloak the valley beyond. There was little to see as Weed squinted through the whorled panes; only the neglected grounds of the inn, the leaf-paved roadway beyond. Above the doorway, the signboard swung with the wind. Its hinges squawled like a raven’s croak, and against the inn’s lights it flung a swaying shadow across the frosted earth like the shadow of raven’s wings.

He examined the bolted door. There should be a man posted outside, he realized. Even on this night, even though Pleddis was certainly camped a safe distance back on their trail. Again he thought of Frassos’s strange disappearance. It was not a night to venture beyond the security of bright lights and locked doors. Even as a stranger to these mountains, Weed sensed the presence of evil abroad beneath Demonlord’s Moon.

Gloomily he sank onto a bench, his eyes toward the door. Behind him he could hear sounds from the kitchen. The warm smell of roasting fowl carried from the cooking area beyond the bar. Braddeyas kept

watch on the two women. Once food was prepared for the ride before them, the women could be bound and locked in with the others. Then perhaps he could get Braddeyas to stand guard outside the inn.

Weed dug his fingers into his eyes, more savagely than need be, for sleep was numbing his senses. Braddeyas might refuse. Weed wouldn't blame him; he doubted that he would accept the risk, either. And while Weed was second in command now, Braddeyas had been with Kane too many years to be bullied into obedience by the younger outlaw.

The noises from the kitchen seemed farther away, almost melodious. The fire was burning better now, and he could feel its heat on his side. Weed slapped his face stingingly, fighting off the deadly fatigue. Perhaps he should walk about the room.

Maybe he should walk through the door, mount his horse, and ride out. One man would stand a far better chance of escaping pursuit. Let Pleddis overtake Kane and the others. Kane was the reason for his relentless pursuit; he would not bother to press on after one bandit. The price on Weed's head was tempting for a single bounty hunter, but Pleddis had to pay his men; economics would save him. And yet, Kane might well win free. The bandit leader had done the incredible time and again before this. Perhaps Kane could elude the arrows of fate once more,

Weed felt a certain loyalty to Kane. He had fought beside Kane, followed his commands—and Kane had proved to be a highly capable and generous leader. Indeed, in the final battle Weed and the others had broken through Pleddis's ambush on the savage force of Kane's charge through the mercenary ranks. But Weed felt a greater loyalty to his own neck, and it appeared certain that Kane would never again hold power over the Myceum passes. There remained the secret cache of loot that Kane had hidden away—against a disaster such as this. At present Weed's possessions consisted of a sore-hooved mount, a notched sword, and his battle-torn gear. If Kane would lead them to his cache...

The sweet-smoke scent of roasting hens wrapped about him, watering his mouth, though his belly was warm with wine and meat from the meal just eaten. His head fell downward onto his arm. He should get up before sleep claimed him.

And he did rise to his feet. Or he seemed to see his body stand, pace about the room, peer through the fogged bull's-eye panes. The shadows seemed to creep and hover in grotesque patterns as he paced...

With a sudden jarring crash, Weed fell to the floor.

In an instant of confused panic, he thrashed free of the overturned bench and tried to regain his feet, thinking dully that he had rolled off in his sleep. Then he became aware of the jeering face above the swordpoint levelled at his throat. Weed froze.

"Now there we went and woke him up," grinned Pleddis.

Weed swallowed and waited for death. Many hands jerked him to his feet, tore away his sword and dagger. A dozen or more of Pleddis's men were pouting into Raven's Eyrie—entering through the kitchen, where Braddeyas lay with a split skull. A sudden uproar, fierce but quickly stilled, echoed across the inn as the mercenaries burst in on Darros and Seth. They died where they slept.

Weed sweated. Pleddis's blade glinted before his throat.

The mercenary captain's face was jubilant, but his eyes were like the edge of his sword. "Where's Kane?" he demanded softly.

Scarcely comprehending that disaster had so swiftly overtaken them, Weed stood silent, swaying back from the blade. His mouth was dry.

"You got half a minute to tell me. And you've just about used that up."

Ionor appeared from the kitchen. Her face was flushed and her blouse disordered. "They carried him upstairs," she announced, hatred bright in her voice. "I'll show you where."

"Carried?"

"He's wounded near death, by the look of his side. He couldn't walk."

Pleddis smiled like a wolf at her words. "By Vaul, you were right about your aim, Stundorn! I'll double your share if it sure enough was your quarrel that brought the devil low. Quickly now, show us!"

Leaving Weed under guard, the captain and a number of his men followed Ionor up the stairs to the third level. Triumphant she led them to the door of the room where Kane had been taken. Pleddis's smile split his leathery face. Inside this room lay the object of his pursuit, the successful conclusion of a dangerous campaign. And a bounty that would leave him a wealthy man.

Knowing Kane's cunning, their weapons were poised for whatever last trick he might have left. In the darkness outside, others of his men surrounded the inn. Kane would not escape. But even with a crippling wound, they feared the savage power of his sword.

Sucking in his breath, Pleddis kicked open the door. It was unlocked. Slammed back against the wall.

Only silence met them. Kane lay sprawled across the bed, unmoving. A chill wind eddied through the open window. Blood stained the blankets. Kane's arms lay at his sides, in the attitude in which his men had left him. His face was turned to one side; a tiny pool of dampness trickled past his partly opened lips. In the flickering firelight his face seemed unnaturally lax and pale.

Wary of tricks, Pleddis approached the bed. Kane did not move. Only when he reassured himself that no weapon lay near did Pleddis touch the silent figure. Kane's skin was cold as a snake's. Almost impatiently the captain shook his still form, found his body unnaturally rigid. Frowning, he felt for a pulse, then held his blade before the motionless nostrils. No moisture fogged the cold steel.

Pleddis stood up, almost with an air of disappointment

"He's dead."

IV. Hounds and Carrion Crows

Weed slumped against a table, his arms tightly bound behind his back, his mind seeking desperately for some hope of escape. With a sick chill in his belly, he realized his position was without hope. And cutting through the dull panic was the agonizing thought that he had thrown away his life to stay with a dead man.

Pleddis's men filled the common room, warming themselves with fire, food and drink, excited congratulations. He had pulled them all inside when it was evident that the bandits had been taken; they had rushed into the inn as if it were the last refuge against the mist-shrouded night. Maybe it was. There were more than twenty men milling about the room, wearing the motley gear of mercenary soldiers. With their stamping and loud laughter, they sounded like hunters just come in from a grueling and successful hunt. From their impersonal stares, Weed felt like a snared fox surrounded by a pack of baying hounds.

Seated by the fire, Pleddis was in high spirits. He drank wine from a sloshing cup and accepted the applause of his men, his weathered face almost flushed. There was little enough color to the man. His skin was pale and seamed bleached instead of tanned by wind and sun. His hair was close-cropped and grey, his face clean-shaven; his eyes were of a peculiar washed-out blue so as to appear grey. He was of average height, but compactly built, giving him a deceptively stubby appearance. Gear of worn leather and chain mail ionic were nondescript as his person—and the same faded grey. But his teeth were straight and white, and he flashed them in a broad smile when he laughed, which was often—a rapid, mirthless bark.

He was laughing now.

“A fine last stand for Kane and his fearsome band of killers, eh? Trapped like rabbits in a hole, sleeping like they was in their mother's arms. One man snoring at his post, the other so busy trying to get under the mistress's skirts that he never noticed she'd unlatched the woodshed door to the outside. Vault, what dreadful desperadoes! I'm going to feel silly asking for the bounty on the likes of you! But I'll still ask!” His men joined in his laughter.

Pleddis gulped down his wine, his shrill laugh muffled against the cup. “Of course, you must have figured Captain Pleddis would lie low tonight, sit shivering at his campfire, jumping every time an owl screamed. Did you now? Sure you did. You really thought I'd quit a trail not hours cold, and after three days of chasing after you! Well, I grew up on Thovnos, so I guess I didn't hear all the gruesome tales of Demonlord's Moon you mountain people like to shudder over. Same goes for most of my men, though some of them had their worries about riding on.”

His face turned grim, and he stared contemptuously over their ranks. A number of them avoided his eyes. “But it wasn't too hard to make them see that a pack of devils was a better risk than crossing Pleddis, eh?” He laughed again.

“Huh! What about the two men we lost getting here?” grumbled a mercenary from the rear, who quickly ducked from Pleddis's searching scowl.

“You'll not see them again,” a husky voice told them. “The Demonlord hunts beneath this moon, and you'll see no more of them his hound pulls down.”

Pleddis made an annoyed grimace. “Well, he would have found a fat enough morsel in you, old woman.”

“Greshha!” There was a strange hint of anger in Ionor’s voice.

The older woman crept almost guiltily from behind the mass of soldiers whose entrance she had followed. The servant’s plump cheeks were still ashen with fear, and she blinked and trembled as if dazed.

“So she does belong here,” said Pleddis. “We found the old woman hanging back along the road. Seemed so glad to see us she came running into our arms. Couldn’t talk two words of sense—something bad her bad scared. Now I see it was her own bogey tales.”

“She’s a servant here,” explained Ionor in a tight voice. “She had been given the night off, and I had supposed she would spend it with friends in the village near here.” She jerked her hand toward the kitchen, and Greshha dumbly followed her gesture.

Meanwhile Eriall, one of Pleddis’s lieutenants whose face Weed knew, had carried in a grisly burden. “Here they are,” he announced holding out both fists. Clenched by their scarlet-spattered hair, three heads dangled from his grip. Their jaws hung loosely, tongues lolling, eyes rolled upward in a fish stare behind half-closed lids.

“Recognize your friends?” laughed Pleddis. “Eriall, you’re dribbling blood all over your hostess’s floor. Where’s your manners?”

The other grinned and showed the heads to Weed. “Maybe this piece of shit ought to lick the boards clean.”

“Too bad the one’s skull is busted near in half,” mused Pleddis, mourning a damaged trophy. “Well, pack them good in salt with the others. They bring us five ounces of gold each in Nostoblet, and I doubt the Merchants’ League will care if their purchases are a bit damaged in transit. Mind you cut off that earring there.”

“Why don’t I just take along his while I’m doing the rest?” suggested Eriall.

Pleddis stroked his jaw thoughtfully. “How about that, Weed? Want to ride back to Nostoblet all packed in salt? They set twenty ounces of gold on your head, but maybe they’ll pay a little extra if we hand you over intact. You’d rate a public execution all to yourself. Be real nice. Which way do you want it now?”

“Let me kill him,” snarled Ionor.

Pleddis considered her gravely. “Bloodthirsty is the lust of a woman,” he misquoted. “But I’d like to carry one back alive to Nostoblet, so he can tell everyone there how Captain Pleddis ran them down and made raven food out of the whole damned wolfpack.”

Ionor’s face was twisted, her breath fast. Weed thought of a hot-cleftedslut who had been cheated of her climax. “Hang him from the railing then for me—I want to watch him die. It’s my right. You caught them in my inn. You might still be trailing them if they hadn’t stopped here.”

Pleddis seemed to be weakening. “They might pay extra if he’s alive.”

“I’ve given you food and lodging here,” argued Ionor. “The extra gold will be less than payment.”

“But you owe me your lives for saving you from Kane’s men,” Pleddis pointed out. The game amused him.

“Should I add Kane’s head to the others?” broke in Eriall.

“Not when they’ll pay me five hundred ounces of gold for Kane,” Pleddis brayed. “For that I’ll bring in the whole carcass. Bad as they want Kane, they’ll likely pickle him in brine and put him on display. Bet they could charge admission just to see him. Bet they will, in fact!

“No, it’s cold enough we can sling him over a horse, and he’ll last until we can get back to Nostoblet. They won’t care what he smells like there. Stundorn, take a few men and drag Kane’s body down here. We’ll leave him in the stables where the frost will keep him from getting ripe too fast. Watch that the dogs don’t get at him.”

They had left Kane where he lay when they found him dead. Several minutes had passed since then, in the confused aftermath of Pleddis’s attack on the inn. But now the captain’s attention returned to the prize quarry of his hunt. Stundorn and some others disappeared up the stairs.

“Weed, I’m still not sure what to do with you,” he continued.

“Hang him,” Ionor pleaded, her memory reliving a scene eight years back. A memory of familiar faces turning purple, of limbs thrashing a death dance from an impromptu gallows, while murder-crazed animals roared in laughter below.

“I suppose I can grant the request of a handsome lady,” gallantly remarked Pleddis, thinking that his hostess had a definite beauty beneath the harsh mask of hatred.

Weed forced himself to speak with scornful assurance.

“Grant it and be damned. I can’t hope for any better in Nostoblet. And I’ll die with the secret of Kane’s hidden cache of loot.”

It was a foolish bluff, he realized in panic. But against imminent death, any respite would offer hope.

“Well, now...” began Pleddis, his eyes lighting with sudden interest.

Stundorn burst onto the balcony, his bearing totally shaken.

“Kane’s gone!” he blurted.

V. To Chase the Dead

Kane breathed a silent curse as his boot slipped from its purchase on the limestone wall. For an instant he swung precariously in the darkness, only the steel grip of his fingers against the stone block saving him from a thirty-foot drop to the frosted earth below. The fall might not kill him, but it was crippling height for surety. Grimly he forced his scrambling boot back into a masonry crack and rested his arms from the tearing weight of his massive frame. His great strength now seemed scarcely sufficient to stand upright, and his wounded side was lancing agony—but at least the strain and the chill air had cleared his thoughts somewhat.

From the open window above him, Kane heard the startled shouts of Pleddis's soldiers. Baffled rage flamed within him. He had needed more time to descend the wall of the inn. Weakened as he was, he could never reach the ground before a frantic search revealed him to his enemies. Again his boot slipped as he sought to hurry his descent. The limestone blocks of the inn had been set flush in the wall originally—a precaution against athletic thieves or guests who cared not to settle their account. Only because mountain winds and winters had eroded the masonry over the years was Kane able to find purchase—such purchase as there was.

Not even extreme exhaustion and the mists of opium had completely dulled Kane's uncanny senses. The feral instincts that countless times had drawn him from sleep to full awareness of imminent danger had called to him once again. Kane had awakened to the brief clamour of Pleddis's attack, and almost instantly he had understood his position.

Even at peak condition Kane would have stood no chance against a score of seasoned mercenaries. And he knew he was trapped—knew without wasting a glance outside that a man of Pleddis's capability would have surrounded Raven's Eyrie before thrusting within. In another minute his enemies would be smashing down his door—unless he decided to make a suicidal rush down the stairs, or let an archer pick him off as he scrambled down the outside wall.

A desperate plan came to him then. Pleddis knew he was gravely injured. He would let the bounty hunter find him dead. Any number of risks suggested themselves to him instantly, but plainly there was no other course. Pleddis would lower his guard only if he believed his quarry dead.

It was not too difficult for one of Kane's knowledge. His appearance was ghastly enough for a corpse, and the cold draft through the window coupled with the chill sweat that had seized him would impart a convincing clamminess to his flesh. Over the centuries Katie had delved deeply into all manner of occult studies, and the discipline of imposing mental control over physical functions was known to students far less adept than Kane. For much of their ride, Kane had held himself in a near trance to conserve his strength, and now he withdrew his consciousness into a deeper coma, rigidly controlling breath and heart beat to so low an ebb as to appear lifeless to Pleddis's inspection.

Several minutes after his enemies had quit his bedside, Kane returned to full awareness. He realized he now had only a few minutes to escape—a short interval once Pleddis had ordered his men from their surveillance of the inn. They would celebrate the success of their lone hunt; for a moment all would be jubilant confusion. Then for any of a hundred reasons someone would return to the dead man upstairs. By then Kane must be gone.

He had cut it close. Too close. Kane had barely lowered himself through the window when Stundorn entered the room. In another instant their stunned fright would leave them. Someone would peer out the open window.

And he could never reach the ground in time. Quickly Kane took the only course left to him. Another window was close at hand. Recklessly Kane clawed his way to the darkened aperture. Somehow he managed to maintain a hold long enough to rest his weight on the ledge. He pushed at the lattice.

It was secured.

Kane bit his lip and tore a knife from his belt. He jammed its blade into the crack between window and casement. His movements seemed panic-driven, but his haste was that of one experienced in his task. In only a few seconds the latch snapped free.

Swinging open the heavy lattice, Kane squeezed through the window. No sooner had his cloak and sword scabbard cleared the ledge than a shout from close by signalled that someone had looked outside.

“No one on the wall!” a soldier called out.

Kane grinned savagely and glared through the darkness of the room. He was not alone.

A small figure crouched on the room’s narrow bed. Her wide eyes were almost luminous as she stared at him—a huge, menacing figure outlined in the moonlight at her window,

“Are you alive?” she whispered. His appearance was supernatural, and she had been listening to the shouts outside her door.

Kane made no comment. He had swung into the child’s room, and he remembered that the door was locked from outside. His dagger still shone in his hand. “Don’t make a sound!” he hissed.

Klesst’s voice was grave. “I won’t tell them you’re here,” she said, “Father.”

“I remember one time down along the coast,” Pleddis said, staring into the empty room. “It was late fall, and we were making camp for the night. Dragging in driftwood for a fire, and one of the outfit hauls loose a big snag—and there’s a swamp adder thick as your arm, all laid out and sluggish with cold. Kid was from the coast, knew what he had, so he just laid into it with the stick of wood he was carrying, not even wasting time to pull his sword. Must of hit it fifty times, till the stick busted and the snake was half flattened out. Had to be dead; we didn’t think any more about it.

“Long about the end of second watch we all woke up—Vaul, it was a scream to chill your guts! There was the kid flopping out of his blanket roll, that damn black snake with its fangs buried in his neck. Hell, its head was bigger than your fist and full of venom, and I don’t guess the kid lived long enough for us to stir up the fire.

“After that night I never trusted a dead snake. Always hack them to chunks, no matter how dead they look. Except just now,” he concluded bitterly.

“He can’t of got far,” Eriall judged. “Hadn’t had no time, and crippled up like he was.”

Pleddis grunted and inspected the window casement. Lanterns flashed from the ground below. “What

do you see?" he called down.

Nattios bawled back, "Nothing. No marks below. We're looking along the wall."

The mountaineer was no fool at tracking, Pleddis knew. "Well, look closer. There's blood on the ledge here."

"No. Nothing," came the reply after a pause.

"There's rocks down there," Eriall said, craning his squat neck to look down.

"Yeah, and there's frost, too," Nattios retorted gruffly. "Good as sand for leaving tracks. Ain't nothing."

"Well, Kane couldn't have crawled down that wall, anyway," the stocky lieutenant declared. "Mail that big couldn't scale these stones even if he wasn't busted up. The blood's a false trail."

Pleddis's laugh returned. It was not pleasant. "Kane could have done it. He's not lying in bed there. He either went out the window or out the door. I got men at every exit, so if there's no tracks outside he has to be hiding inside. Won't do him any good, because we'll find him."

"Could be he got out somewhere else, mixed his trail in with our tracks," Eriall persisted. "We came in from all around the sides, you know."

"Could be. But I figure Kane didn't have the time to do anything too fancy. He's hiding in here somewhere. If he's not, we'll pick up his trail with the dogs they got here. Long as we keep him from the horses, he won't get far."

Stundorn's stubbled face was strange. "Captain, you're sure he was just faking he was dead, then?"

Pleddis glared at him. "Dead men don't run out on you." Abruptly he scowled. "Unless some bastard slipped back and stole the corpse for the bounty!" He thought carefully. "No, I can account for all of us, and for the bunch that stay here, too. Still, if I find some bastard's pulling a fast one, there's going to be one more head in that salt pack, and it won't cost the Merchants' League a copper!"

But Stundorn remembered that his quarrel was supposed to have given Kane his death wound. "All the same, captain, it's the Demonlord's Moon. They say his powers hold sway over the mountains tonight. Maybe he could make the dead rise. And there's all kinds of black legends about Kane. We may be trailing a dead man, captain."

Pleddis stood a moment, face impassive. Then his laugh barked rustily. "Maybe so, Stundorn. But you just remember that corpse is worth five hundred ounces of yellow gold, and if he comes looking for you, just yell for me."

"Father!" exploded Kane, in a louder tone than he intended. He crossed the room to the girl's bed.

"Yes," Klesst whispered. "I saw you come in, and they said you were Kane. The children in the village call me Kane's bastard. They say you carried Mother away after you raided the inn, and after she

escaped and came back she had me, and you were my father.”

Kane stared at her.

“See. I have red hair like yours, and my eyes are bluelike yours.” Klesst did not flinch from Kane’s stare. “I can even see in the dark better than the other children, like the stories tell about you.”

“Your grandmother,” Kane muttered, touching the child’s face.

“So I won’t tell those soldiers where you are,” Klesst concluded.

“You should hate me.” Her skin was feverish. As was his.

“No,” declared Klesst. “The others hate me. But when they hear stories about you, then they look frightened. I like to see them frightened. I like to think they’re even a little frightened of me.”

Kane shook his head. The excited shouts of his pursuers brought him back to the moment. Turning from her, he risked a glance through the window. Outside they were circling the inn with torches and lanterns. He knew they would find no trail. Then they would begin to search the inn. Digging grime from his boots, he smudged over the bright scratches made by his knife on the latch. There was no smear of blood on the casement that he could see.

Grimly he took stock of his chances. They were not good. All that his ruse had accomplished was to give him another few minutes. The end was inevitable, unless he could slip through their net. And even then. . .

Kane forced his mind to think clearly. For the moment, the threat of certain death had spurred him from exhaustion. Some final reserve of strength kept him moving when he should lie senseless, pushed back the black waves of fever and opium. The barricades must soon break.

“I knew you from my dream,” his daughter told him. “But then I didn’t know your name.”

About to warn her to be silent, Kane stopped. “How can you dream of someone you’ve never seen?” he wondered, somewhat in awe of the child. Seeing her brought memories that he cared not to linger upon just now.

“I saw you,” Klesst insisted. “And another man, all in black with a great black cloak. He has a great black hound. . .”

Kane frantically signed for her to be silent. A number of men were coming down the hall. They were searching the rooms.

Kane’s hand reached over his right shoulder, and the ancient blade of Carsultyal steel silently swung from its scabbard. It was a good weapon, Kane thought with grim pride. This one had been difficult to find—probably few like it still existed. Carsultyal lay buried by sand and sea and time. And the ancient city’s last citizen would very shortly lie dead with its memory.

Again he glanced outside. They were watching from below. The soldiers in the hall—he might kill the first group to enter, but there were more to take their place, and Kane was trapped—wounded so that his last fight would not even be a good one.

The door was locked from outside. And there was Klesst. It might make them less thorough in their

search; they would likely assume the child would cry out if Kane had somehow hidden inside her room.

A futile hope, probably. And the room was too small. Kane assumed it was one of the narrow single rooms for wealthy travellers who deigned not to share quarters with other guests. Such accommodations cost dear and were cramped, but at least a well-to-do traveller would not have to share a bed with three hog drovers.

The search was only a few doors away.

And there was no place to bide. Just a bare-timbered room. No chests, no tapestries. Kane's huge frame could never squeeze under Klesst's tiny bed. There was a closet. That in itself marked the room as once a luxury accommodation. Kane swung open its door. The closet was surprisingly large, considering the economy of space that an inn demanded. An oddly dank smell came from within. A few nondescript items of clothing hung from pegs along the interior.

It was worth a chance. At any event, Kane decided, when they opened the door he would hurl himself out, with luck cut down a couple of them before they could meet his rush. It was better than standing there like a condemned man in the middle of his death cell.

"What's your name?" he asked suddenly.

"Klesst."

"Well, Klesst, I'm going to step inside your closet. I want you to pull this latch down from outside, and then get back in bed. When the soldiers come in, just tell them no one's been in here. And if they don't believe you and look inside... well, afterwards you can tell them that I said I'd hurt you unless you did as I told you."

Klesst nodded, impressed by the important task he had given her. She smiled uncertainly as she shut the closet, then quickly shot the latch. She barely had time to scurry back to bed before they came to her door.

"This is the kid's room," someone observed. "Been locked."

"Well, open it, anyway," ordered a gruff voice.

A scraping of the bolt, then suspicious faces peered in from the hall.

The gruff voice belonged to a paunchy man with thick shoulders and a rolling gait. He carried an arbalest, his fingers near the trigger. "Hey, kid," he demanded, "anybody come in here?"

"No, sir," Klesst said, being polite to make him trust her.

Their eyes carefully searched the shadows of the room. "You sure?"

"Yes, sir."

"You been awake?"

"Yes, sir."

“You sure you ain’t been asleep?”

“No... I mean, yes, sir.”

The man with the arbalest entered the room. Several other men followed. Swords were bare in their fists.

A thin-faced mercenary examined the window. “It’s locked, Stundorn. No sign of blood or anything,” he stated in a nasal voice.

Stundorn shifted his arbalest. Klesst wondered why the steel bow didn’t snap its string. “Might have been open before. This room is below Kane’s, off to the side only a little. He might have climbed down.”

He frowned at Klesst. “You see anything, kid?”

“No, sir.”

“You wouldn’t lie now, would you?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you know what happens to little girls who lie?”

“Yes, sir.” Klesst’s imagination grappled with the possibilities.

“And you haven’t seen any sign of a big bandit with blood just pouring down his ribs where I shot him?”

“No, sir.”

“Closet’s latched from outside,” someone noted.

“Now you aren’t hiding my bandit inside your closet, are you?” Stundorn rumbled.

“No, sir.” *What did happen to little girls who lied?*

“Do you know I got an itchy nose?”

“No, sir.”

“It’s a fact. My nose itches every time I hear a lie.” Klesst stared in horrid fascination.

“Now why do you suppose it’s itching right now?”

“I don’t know, sir,” she answered shakily.

Stundorn stood back from the closet door. He brought his arbalest to his shoulder, sighted about chest height on the door. His fingers curled over its trigger.

“Now open that door, Profaka ,” he directed the thin-faced mercenary.

Gingerly Profaka reached across to the latch and drew it back.

He yanked open the door.

The closet was empty.

“This place is clean,” Eriall informed his leader. “Been through it from attic to cellar, looked in every hole bigger than a chamber pot. Ain’t no Kane, and that’s a fact.”

Pleddis nodded tiredly. He had overseen most of the work. “Yeah, and no one made a break for the outside; I had men out there watching every block of stone on this inn.”

The captain banged his fist on the wall in anger. “Obviously, then, Kane somehow got outside before we realized his trick.”

“But how? We pretty well proved he had to be inside.”

“Well, we damn well just proved he’s not inside! Now you tell me where that leaves us!”

Eriall was silent. He massaged his shaven skull. Pleddis’s laugh startled him.

“Sure, I know what he did!” His white teeth flashed in a grin. “You just got to think like Kane thinks. Now Kane’s smart, and he’s got a lot of tricks. He went out the window, sure, but he didn’t climb down. That’s what he knew we’d think he’d do. So instead Kane climbed *up*! He was on the top floor, so getting to the roof was actually easier than climbing all the way to the ground.

“Kane must have worked his way along the roof up to where it abuts the burned-out north wing. Then he just climbed down onto the old walls and groped his way down into the gutted interior, and slipped through the rubble and into the night—while we were standing like fools wondering where his body had got to!”

“Then he’s had a good start all this time we been looking under beds!” Eriall growled.

“Maybe,” Pleddis admitted, still pleased with his cleverness. “But Kane don’t have a horse. Wounded and on foot we’ll run him down in an hour. Nattios! Find Ionor and tell her we’ll need dogs for tracking! Hurry! What’s the matter?”

“We’re going to track Kane now?” the mountaineer queried uneasily. “It will soon be midnight. The Demonlord will hunt-”

“Move, damn you!” Pleddis hissed. “Yes, we’re going to track him! Do you want the Demonlord to catch him? Lord Tloluvín don’t need that gold!”

“Don’t speak his name!” Nattios gasped. Seeing the vicious anger rise in Pleddis’s eyes, he ran to find Ionor.

VI. In Seven Years You'll Hear a Bell...

Ionor turned on Greshha with thinly checked fury. “Why did you come back? I told you to take tonight off.”

They were alone in the inn's great kitchen. Shouts close by told of Pleddis's fast-moving search of the rambling structure. The two drovers had joined in, and Ionor had ordered Cholos and Mauderas to help the mercenaries—even directing Sele to guide the searchers through the huge inn. Ionor felt certain Kane would be found if he were hiding within the walls of Raven's Eyrie. If not...

Her jaw tightened as she scowled at the older woman. Greshha was avoiding her eyes. “I said, why didn't you stay away?”

The servant woman took a deep breath. Her thick body shook. “I guess I know you didn't want me here,” she mumbled, face downcast.

“What did you say?”

Greshha raised her chin; her eyes were shrewd. “I guess I know why you wanted me to stay away tonight,” she stated in a louder voice, defiantly.

A hiss escaped Ionor's tightly drawn lips. She started to swing back her hand, then checked her arm. “What are you talking about?” Her voice was like a slap.

“I'm no fool. I can remember,” Greshha stolidly told her. “I know you hate the child.”

Ionor's long fingers clenched and opened, like a pantheress flexing her claws. She tossed her head, and her loose braid flicked over her shoulder, twitched down her back like an angry black tail.

The stout mountain woman did not quail before her mistress's obvious look of menace. “Poor Klesst. I can't blame you for hating her when she came. But after all these years! I kept taking care of her when it was your place, hoping you'd learn to love her. But you never did, Ionor. There's no loving left in you—only hate. Hate's eaten the soul out of your breast, so you can't even love your own flesh...”

“Shut up, you fat fool! I've tolerated your meddling, but you've overstepped your place this time!”

“I never thought you'd go through with it. All this time I kept thinking you'd soften to her. But you're cold, burned out, Ionor. There's no heart left in you. I know now you mean to do it.”

Ionor drew back against the cutting table, her lips twisted in a snarl. “What are you talking about?”

Ducking her head for breath, Greshha plunged on. Her round face took on an aspect of sullen determination. “I was here when you were birthing her, don't forget. I stayed with you when your

screams and curses drove everyone else from your bed. I held you down and tried to comfort you when the midwife had to use the knife to bring her forth from your womb. And even while you screamed out things to make the gods turn away from you, I stayed with you and pitied you because no one thought you could live through the night.

“Seven years ago tonight, it was, Ionor. And they all said it was a miracle when both you and the child lived through. But only I knew what kind of miracle it was.”

“You’re an old fool, Greshha!”

“Old, but no fool. The things you was screaming weren’t good to cry out—not with the Demonlord’s Moon shining down through your window. They weren’t good to hear, and that’s why the others drew away from you that night. I’ll confess it, I was afraid myself, and when the child was born, and the midwife had done what she could, and we thought the opium would let you ease into sleep... Well, I left you, too, and told myself to look to the child because her mother would be gone by daybreak.

“Then when the dogs began to howl and cringe, and the others all huddled by the fire and prayed... I couldn’t leave you alone to die, not when the fires all burned low and blue under the shadows. I crept back to your room, praying each step, and afraid to think what it was we heard snuffling outside the inn.

“And I stopped at your door when I heard your voice, and when I heard that *other* voice answer, I knew who you was talking with, and I knew it was worse than death to open your door. I just froze there too scared to tremble, and the words you two spoke burned into my memory like hot iron into flesh. And after *he* left, I still stood there crying and praying and not making a sound. And when I finally took heart to look in the door, I saw you lying there asleep with a black smile on your lips, and I knew your strength would be back in the morning.

“But before the gods, Ionor, I never thought you’d do it! I swear I would have smothered you there as you lay if I had believed that. I kept thinking, she’ll learn to love once she’s held the child to her breast and she forgets the horror and the shame and the pain. But you never held the child to your breast, and you never learned to love her—because all that’s left in you is hate, Ionor.

“So I knew why you wanted me gone tonight, and that’s why I wouldn’t go. And I’ll not go. I’ll not let you do it.”

“You meddling old fool!” spat Ionor. “If you dare interfere... But what can you do?”

Greshha expanded her shoulders truculently. “There’s soldiers here. Captain Pleddis has League authority. Hewon’t let you do this thing.”

Ionor laughed. “Pleddis is a cold-blooded bounty killer. His soldiers are hired thugs. He’ll not care what I do. He only wants Kane.”

“Maybe so. I guess I’ll find out what he’ll do.”

“Don’t be a bigger fool!”

Maybe he’ll be interested if I tell him he might not get Kane.”

“I’m warning you!”

Greshha looked at her livid face and backed away. No longer was there doubt in her mind; instead there was fear. The servant woman started for the door to the Common room; she could hear heavy boots approaching from there.

As she turned, Ionor's hand came away from the cutting table. The sharpening steel in her fist made a rotten crunch as she brought it down over Greshha's skull. The mountain woman crumpled to the floor with no more sound than a dropped sack of grain.

Ignoring the huddled body, Ionor glared at the door. She had acted out of desperate rage, without forethought. And someone was entering the kitchen.

It was Mauderas. He halted at the threshold in surprise. His hulking figure blocked the doorway; behind him stretched the inn's bar, and beyond she could see several of Pleddis's men moving through the common room.

"Close that door!" she hissed. "Lock it!"

Mauderas obeyed, a stunned expression on his dark face. "What happened?"

"Never mind," Ionor told him. "I had to stop her from talking to Pleddis."

"She dead?"

"I think so. We can't let them find her."

Mauderas licked his mustache and surveyed the room. The outer doors were barred, but Pleddis's men were watching from outside. Fortunately the windows were shuttered on the back wall. No one had seen... yet.

"I don't see what Pleddis would care about—"

"Don't forget Captain Pleddis is a lawman!" she snapped. "Maybe he wouldn't use his authority, maybe he would. No point in tempting luck. I don't want to fool around with that bounty hunter right now. We'll have to hide her body—tell them she went back to the village, if anyone asks."

"How? She's too big to stuff under something, and Pleddis's men are all over the place. Someone's going to want to come in here any minute. They can't turn up Kane anywhere, and Pleddis was about to tear up the floorboards looking for hiding places."

"I know; they came through here twice before. Does it look like Kane left the inn, then?"

Mauderas nodded. "Pleddis figured out how. They'll be out scouring the ridges next."

Ionor thought carefully for a moment and came to a decision. "Then we'll do it the old way. Take her out the passage and sink her. That way it's certain they won't find her."

Mauderas put a broad hand on her shoulder. "Been a long time since I sunk anyone."

"I feel confident you haven't lost your touch."

"Passage hasn't been opened since the raid. Thought you wanted to forget the old days, keep the

passage closed up.”

“I know what I said. But I don’t want to risk complications with Pleddis.”

Mauderas shrugged. “Anyway you call it then, Ionor.”

Stooping over the limp body, he arranged the loose limbs with the calm competence of one who knows his task. With a grunt he rose up again, Greshha’s lax figure slung across his broad back. “The old woman weighs more than a side of beef,” he grumbled.

But Ionor had left him. Descending the steps to the wine cellar, she paused to grasp a portion of the railing. With a sharp tug, the upright swung out from the banister like a lever. It was a lever. Somewhere below a counterbalance released, and a large section of the flagstone cellar floor rumbled smoothly into the outer wall.

A square of blackness opened in the cellar floor, from which a stale, damp wind welled up. It was like a breath from some slumbering behemoth. Indeed, the sound of muffled breathing seemed to emanate from within—a distant rushing moan.

Stairs of greasy limestone descended into the gloom. Mauderas took a lamp from Ionor, holding it clumsily under the weight of his burden. He eyed the passage doubtfully.

“Hurry! I think I hear someone calling for me!”

Mauderas grunted and put a boot on the top step. “Oh, I’ll hurry. But I’ll hurry back to keep you warm tonight.”

Ionor made an impatient gesture. “Stay there for awhile before you return to the inn—and leave by the other way. They’ll believe me if I say you went to walk Greshha part way to the village. And later no one will question a disappearance on Demonlord’s Moon.”

“Any way you call it, honey,” Mauderas drawled, his ice rising from the darkness. “I’ll be along to keep you warm directly...”

Hurriedly Ionor swung the lever back to its upright position. The section of flagstones grated back into place. Pounding on the kitchen door was thunderous as she emerged from the cellar.

“Sorry. I was getting brandy,” she explained, unbolting the door to admit Nattios and several of his fellows. “With that devil running loose, a lady likes to keep herself locked in safe.”

VII. Raven’s Secret

Satisfied that no bones were broken, Kane struggled to his feet. He would limp badly, but his high boots had reinforced his ankles so that the shock of impact had not resulted in a disabling sprain or worse. Or worse. He massaged his aching shoulder; his right arm had almost been torn from its socket. But by all rights he should be lying here with a broken neck.

Kane looked about him, reconstructing what had happened now that the scarlet bursts of pain were receding from his consciousness.

When Klesst had fastened the closet door, Kane had stepped back against its wall. He had a vague impression of reaching to steady himself. His groping fingers closed on something—had it been one of the pegs?—that had swung inward with his shove.

Then the section of closet floor on which he stood dropped away, and Kane felt himself plunging through darkness. Blindly he struck out. His fingers closed on wood—the rung of a ladder. But the rotted wood tore away under the wrenching force of Kane's three hundred pounds of bone and muscle.

Spun about by the jarring contact, Kane desperately clawed at the wall. Other mildewed rungs smashed against his grasp, splintered under his weight. But it was enough to check his hurtling body. Kane's steel-tendon-fingers locked onto the flashing rungs, almost bringing his fall short. Then the dragging mass of his body proved more than the weakened timbers could withstand. The ladder tore loose from its anchorage to the wall and careened to the stones below.

It had been enough to break his fall, Kane dropped the final eight or ten feet and struck the stones on his feet, the wreckage of the ladder splintering beneath him.

He lay for several minutes, semiconscious after the stunning impact. Above him stretched a seemingly endless shaft of blackness. Kane had no clear idea of how far he had fallen. He was in a chamber beneath the cellars of Raven's Eyrie. Klesst's room must be at least fifty feet above—probably more, since the sound of his fall seemed to have brought no response from his pursuers.

Patches of skin were abraded from his hands, and he dug out several large splinters. Gingerly he flexed his fingers, found they were otherwise uninjured. A smile twitched his bleeding lips, for a man with crippled hands was more helpless than if he had broken his leg. Casting about, he found his sword, its point buried inches in the damp limestone. He drew it out, reflecting he had narrowly missed being impaled on its tempered steel.

Once more he gazed up the pitch-dark shaft. He had triggered a trapdoor in the rear of the closet, somewhere above. Obviously a counterbalance had sprung the trap shut once again, otherwise he would see light and puzzled faces would be staring down at him. A ladder was anchored to one wall of the shaft, though it appeared unlikely he would be able to climb back up after the destruction his fall had caused.

Kane had just begun to form a guess as to the shaft's purpose, when he heard a grating rumble overhead. Light suddenly washed down from the roof of the chamber some fifty feet to his left. A section of stone had slid open, revealing a long flight of stone steps. Voices trickled down.

Baring his teeth in a snarl—*Had Pleddis's hound sniffed him out even in this lost hole?*—Kane concealed himself behind a massive stone column. Sword in bleeding fist, he waited.

Instead of the anticipated rush of mercenaries, Kane saw only one man descend the steps—and then the door overhead slid shut. His eyes narrowed in calculation. The man he recognized as one of Ionor's servants; the deadwoman he carried slung over his back Kane had never seen before. This turn of events was a mystery to him. More to the point, it meant that his presence here had not been discovered—on the contrary, the brawny servant seemed intent on a task which demanded secrecy.

The newcomer carried a lantern in his fist. Its light was hardly sufficient to disclose the walls of the

chamber—tens of yards across, and in places shared and vaulted, Evidently the room was a natural cavern which at one time had been roughly restructured to serve as a hidden cellar. A damp breeze ghosted through the darkness, causing the lantern flame to dance, and Kane noted a narrow passage leading out of the cellar's far wall.

Mauderas glanced about the hidden cellar, his face showing more fear than suspicion. This was a place where countless dark crimes had bloodied the stones. It was not a wholesome spot to linger, particularly on the night of Demonlord's Moon.

"What the hell!" he muttered, raising his lantern suddenly. He tensed as the feeble light picked out the splintered ends of the ladder, pointing in all directions like the half-flexed fingers of a dead man's hand. The woman's body slid from his shoulders with a heavy flopping sound.

"That wasn't so rotten it would of collapsed by itself," Mauderas thought aloud. Drawing his sword, he shuffled toward the wreckage, the lantern thrust before him like a shield.

Which left him blind to anything outside the close circle of its light. As he crept past, Kane leaped from the shadow of the pillar. Mauderas sensed his rush and started to turn. Kane's heavy blade sheared off half his face as it passed down through his neck.

The lantern smashed against the floor. A pool of flame licked over the damp stone. Grotesque shadows writhed over the nitre-frosted walls, mocking killer and slain, as Kane wiped his blade clean of the dead man's gore.

"Kane..." A rasping voice called to him.

He spun on his heels, a curse exploding from his throat.

"Kane... is it you?" the eerie voice whispered.

Kane stalked toward the sound. In the rippling light he saw that the woman Mauderas had carried had raised herself weakly.

He knelt at her side. "I'm Kane," he told her, noting the blood that matted her hair.

Her ashen face was lax; her arms quivered spasmodically. Seemingly she had barely strength left to whisper. "The child, Kane... Save Klesst... She may be of your seed, but she's innocent."

"Why is Klesst in any danger, old woman?"

"I honor... She birthed her seven years ago tonight... Nothing but hate in her... She called out to him for vengeance that night..."

"Called out to whom?"

"I heard him at her bedside... His black hound was clawing at our door... The Demonlord came to her..."

Only willpower held life in the mountain woman's dying flesh. All strength had left her—only her eyes and lips showed trembling movement, like the final flickering of a lampwick when no more oil remains. Her voice was trailing off, and Kane anxiously bent his ear to her face.

“The Demonlord bargained with her that night. In seven years he’d draw you back to Raven’s Eyrie. In seven years he’d come with his hound to drag your living flesh down to Hell. Ionor would see her vengeance fulfilled—but the price would be the child. Ionor must take Klesst to Raven’s Bald where the Demonlord and his black hound wait. She must give the hellhound your spoor by throwing the child into its maw...”

“Then the black hound will come for you Kane, to drag your evil soul down to everlasting torment in its master’s realm... and there’s no place you can hide from the hound of Hell! It’s no worse than you deserve, but the child’s done no wrong. Don’t let her sacrifice Klesst... There’s naught but hate in—”

Greshha’s whisper was no longer audible. Kane shook her still form, intent on learning more. And now her eyes and lips were fixed and silent. As they would be forevermore.

The pool of flaming oil crept into tiny islands of fire that one by one snapped and died. Kane arose from the dead woman, and the chamber was once more in darkness.

He stood wondering for a moment, while his uncanny eyes adapted somewhat to the thick gloom. Numbness was stealing over his body. Fighting the pain and exhaustion that clouded his perception and dragged at his limbs, Kane limped toward the passage at the opposite wall. The damp and softly moaning breath issuing from the blackness indicated the passage must lead outward—and Kane had no desire to return to the inn, even if he could gain entrance without discovery.

The passage was cramped, with walls and floor of irregular masses of limestone. Kane judged that portions of the rock had been broken away to enlarge the natural tunnel. He had begun to form an idea of the hidden cellar’s function, and when he reached the end of the passage, his suspicions were confirmed.

The tunnel opened onto a narrow ledge, jutting mid-way from the limestone bluff below Raven’s Eyrie. The River Cotras rushed thunderously beneath the mists another hundred feet down. Close by the mouth of the passage lay a pile of fist-sized stones and broken rubble—harmless enough, but Kane read a more sinister interpretation.

Before the raid, Raven’s Eyrie had been a prosperous caravanserai. But Ionor’s family had gathered its great Wealth by darker harvests than the hosting of trail-weary travellers. Kane suddenly realized that he had uncovered the chilling secret of Raven’s Eyrie.

Such inns of terror were not rare along desolate roadsthrough untilled wilderness. Kane had encountered them on occasion, although never on so grand a scale as Raven’s Eyrie, whose dark secret had never been suspected. He wondered how many other hidden passages opened into guest’s rooms like the one he had unwittingly stood over and tripped. How many black crimes, what heaps of stolen riches, had this hidden cellar known? Studying the cairn of fist-sized rocks, Kane thought of nameless travellers who had been secretly dragged from their beds to this unhallowed cellar, where here, their bellies ripped open and weighted with stones, their corpses were thrown from the ledge to sink forever in the deep current far below.

No doubt their disappearance, if noted, would have been laid to marauding gangs of outlaws; some of

the crimes Kane bitterly reflected, were probably laid to his name. But now the passage showed evidence of long disuse, and Kane wondered why. Did wealthy travellers no longer risk these trails; were their guests too few to disappear without notice? Or was Ionor of a less murderous temperament than her predecessors here? Remembering the hatred in her eyes tonight, Kane doubted this last.

He dismissed the matter; it was of no concern. Instead there was Pleddis to deal with. And the words of the dying woman. Truth or madness? Kane dared not disregard her whispered warning. He knew the power of hate.

Klesst—he must get to Klesst. For the child was the key to the doom Ionor intended for him. But the ladder in the shaft was hopelessly damaged; even if Kane could somehow bridge the missing section, he doubted that it would bear his weight. And Pleddis held the inn. There were other secret doors, he knew, but it would be impossible to evade detection if he returned to the inn. His escape from there had taken the limit of his strength and guile—and then it was chance that had saved him. He could not hope for this a second time.

Kane's head felt light, dizzy. It was death to get to Klesst. But if he could not reach the child, Ionor would seat her pact with the Demonlord. Then Pleddis and his hired killers would show him far greater mercy than the doom which would certainly claim him.

It was hard to concentrate. Kane's strength ebbed, as pain and fatigue racked his flesh, fever and drug mists swirled through his brain. Raven's Knob, the old woman had whispered—there Ionor was to seal her unhallowed bargain. Kane had a memory of that jutting, spur of barren rock and lightning-blasted trees. Rising from the bleak crest of a high ridge, it was a landmark in the region and the setting for any number of dark legends. No sane man would approach Raven's Knob when the Demonlord's Moon rose behind it. Possibly not even Pleddis could force his men to carry their search to its slopes.

Ionor would take Klesst there. Kane knew he must reach Raven's Knob first. But he had no idea how much time remained to him. He had heard Ionor's voice when Mauderas entered the hidden cellar. Very little time had passed. Ionor, however, would take a straight course for Raven's Knob. Kane, weakened and uncertain of the path, must elude Pleddis's searchers in order to reach the point. And the night held dangers far more sinister than mercenary steel.

There was no other way. Cold anger seethed in Kane's heart. He had been driven across the land, ensnared in this deadly web, each step of his course seemingly predetermined. He would not be the blind pawn in some dark game fate played.

The ledge seemed to twist downward at a steep slant from the mouth of the passage. Clumps of laurel anchored to cracks and folds in the almost sheer face of the bluff; their roots held crumbling shelves of soil and broken rock. They were treacherous footholds under the best conditions; tonight Kane could not imagine worse. Presumably, though, he could work his way to the riverbank along this deadly pretense of a path. If he slipped...

There was no other way.

Fighting the weakness that gnawed at him, the vertigo that already blurred his mind, Kane set his boots against the slippery ledge.

VIII. And That Will Be Your Call to Hell...

“Stundorn, you know better than to hit an unconscious man,” Pleddis told him. “Wait until he comes to again so he can feel it!” He threw back his head with braying laughter.

The paunch-gutted mercenary spat and unwound the cestus from his fist. “May be a while.”

“He’ll keep,” grinned Pleddis, critically studying Weed’s broken face. It took some of the frustrated pain from his belly to picture Kane hanging there instead.

Weed’s battered body slowly spun about. The bandit’s arms had been tied behind his back. Then a longer rope had been tied to his wrists, its other end wound around the balcony railing. They had hoisted him above the floor in this manner, his toes only inches from support. While he hung there, his shoulders threatening to tear from their sockets, Stundorn had worked him over with the cestus.

“When we come back with Kane, he’ll tell us the truth about this cache of loot,” Pleddis promised. “Because he knows this is just a taste of what will happen if he lies to us just once. Only way to make a man tell the truth when he expects death in return—you got to make him want to die.”

He smiled jovially at Ionor. “Now he *is* going to be alive when I get back, isn’t he?”

“This is better than killing him,” she said flatly, watching Weed’s tortured body as it slowly spun from the force of the last blow.

Pleddis laughed appreciatively. “Don’t think I’d want you for my enemy—no, I don’t! Well, then, we’ll let you and that fat tavern keeper guard him close—and your man Mauderas when he comes back. Of course, I’ve got some of my men posted here inside, in case Kane doubles back, and there’s more guarding the horses. Personally, I expect to find him crawling along the mountainside not even a mile from here, but with Kane you best keep all bets covered. He comes back, there’s a welcome here for him.”

A harried Nattios pounded in from outside. “Captain Pleddis, it’s no use!” he blurted. “I can’t do a damn thing with them hounds. You got to drag them out of their kennel, and then they just scrouch down on their bellies and whimper. Hell, one damn near chewed old Usporris’s arm off trying to drag his tail back inside! They’re too scared to piss, captain. They ain’t good for so much as barking at a thief if he was to step over them—ain’t no way we’re going to use them to trail!”

“So.” Pleddis shrugged his shoulders, affecting nonchalance he did not feel. “Then we trail without dogs. Didn’t need them before now. I know damn well you can track a man on foot over this short a field.”

He glared at the long-nosed mountaineer. “Unless you’re too damn scared to do your job. And you and any others who feel that way know what I think about a man who won’t do his job.”

Nattios nodded unhappily. He knew. They all knew.

“Stundorn—you aren’t afraid to chase down a fortune in gold.”

“No, captain,” he lied, face pale beneath stubble beard.

“See, Nattios. Stundorn’s not afraid.”

“You find where Kane’s trail leads off, I’ll take you to him,” Nattios promised sullenly.

“I’ll hold you to your word.” Pleddis’s teeth gleamed brightly. “Now let’s not waste any more time.”

When the sounds of the hunters had been swallowed by the night, Ionor moved from the window and took down her hooded cloak. The dark brown wool would be almost invisible in the night, which was to her liking. An encounter with Pleddis’s soldiers was something she wished to avoid—although it was not for Pleddis to question her coming and going, nor for any man to bold her back from the path she had set foot on seven years before.

Klesst’s wide eyes greeted her when she opened the door. Perhaps if her eyes had not reminded her of Kane... if her hair had not been red like his...

“You’re awake,” Ionor stated in automatic reproof.

“I couldn’t sleep with everything happening, Mother. And I’ve slept so much of the day.” She wanted to ask if the soldiers had captured Kane, but she dared not show interest. But Kane was magic, for he had vanished from her closet. They couldn’t catch a sorcerer, could they?

“That’s all right. Put your clothes on now, Klesst. We’re going to go for a short walk.”

“Why, Mother? Tonight’s the Demonlord’s Moon.” She felt a thrill of bewildered fright.

“That’s all right. The soldiers will protect us from any bad things. The night air will break your fever. Just get dressed now.”

“I think my fever is gone now.” Could soldiers protect her from the black hound?

“Just get dressed.”

She wondered if Mother had a surprise for her birthday. One of the girls in the village told her how she was taken out to the stable on the night of her birthday, and there was a baby colt just born, and she got to have him because he was born on her birthday. But Mother never gave her surprises on her birthday. Sometimes Greshha did, and pretended that they were gifts from Mother, too, but Klesst knew better, because once she saw Greshha embroidering the birthday skirt with her own hands.

“Did I hear one of the soldiers say that Greshha came back?”

“No, Klesst. Why are you dawdling?”

“Which skirt shall I wear, Mother?”

“It doesn’t—Wear the dark blue one.”

That was her best one. “Can I wear my good linen blouse?” Maybe it was a birthday surprise.

“Yes. Hurry, Klesst.” Ionor fidgeted with her fingers, subconsciously seeking to speed her dressing, but not wanting to touch the girl. Her body felt tense as she watched Klesst hurry on her clothes, struggle to push her feet into buskins she had outgrown. She would need a new pair soon. . .

Ionor pushed the thought from her mind. It was too late to turn back; she knew that when Kane returned to Raven’s Eyrie. Pleddis’s appearance had made her think briefly that the Demonlord could be cheated of his bargain. Yet while this thought might have stirred a phantom of hope, far greater was her anger at the chance that her vengeance would not be fulfilled. But the Demonlord would not be cheated. The game was his, and this was only another cat-and-mouse cruelty of his dark humor. She had struggled seven years to quell any love for the child, knowing the unholy bargain she had sworn to consummate. And yet, if Pleddis had taken Kane, might she have learned in time to . . .

Then surged stronger the screaming vision of seven years past—the death and horror of Kane’s raid, the shame of her captivity, the tearing agony later in the ruins of her home...

“Mother , I’m ready now. Why is your face so strange?” Wrapped in her woolen shawl, Klesst looked up at her anxiously.

Ionor shook her head and closed hereyes for a moment. “Nothing’s wrong, Klesst. Now come along quickly.”

IX. Broken Barricades

The mass of laurel roots sagged beneath his weight. Bits of rock and humus crumbled away from where the bush anchored itself to the bluff. He heard the trickling sound of its fall. With painstaking care Kane transferred his weight to another shelf of rock and inched forward against the bluff. No handholds here—just the desperate pressure of his body against the bare rock.

Mist rose from the river far below, breathing a damp film upon the slippery rocks. At times the mist completely obscured the tiny ledge Kane followed, so that he became uncertain which fragmentary path led down to the riverbank, or ended instead several yards beyond in a sheer drop. Time and again he had to backtrack over some perilous section of blind trail which moments before had required all his effort to negotiate. No longer was Kane sure whether he actually followed the path to the river—or even if such a trail existed. The fog held its secrets well, and often he had to rely solely on touch to discover the next foothold.

The mist writhed through his mind as well. Kane lost note of time; it seemed he had been crawling for ages across the treacherous bluff, never coming closer to either summit or base. And in truth he was lost. The rudimentary path he struggled along wormed across the escarpment above the River Cotras for miles beyond the point where Kane had hoped to descend. This path was only a broken ledge along a series of faults in the strata deadly trail no mountain man would attempt even by day. Pleddis, who was scouring the gravel beds between river and cliff, never considered that his wounded quarry would be rash enough to crawl along the escarpment where no path existed. And so Kane passed beyond the line of his pursuers, although the crumbling ledge that had saved him from capture threatened at any instant to cast him headlong into the mist-wreathed darkness.

He seemed to move in a dream. The mist crawled in phantom shapes; spectral hands clawed out to tear him from the ledge. Even the cold, sweating rock seemed unreal, insubstantial. Kane knew this was no dream, but he had to force himself to be aware of his reality. Otherwise he would lose concentration, no longer care whether a tangled clump of laurel would bear his weight or crumble beneath his boot. He ground his bleeding hands against the rock and savagely pressed down on his limping ankle, using the pain to drive back the sense of dream.

But the phantoms waxed more substantial, the lichen-garbed stones less real. And no further could the agony of his body overcome the fever in his mind. Somehow Kane managed to lurch on toward where the ledge seemed to broaden—or was that, too, a trick of his faltering senses? Unable to determine, he sprawled heavily onto the dank shelf of rock.

His limbs were nerveless. His exhausted body ached for air, but his chest seemed too weakened to draw breath fast enough. Kane shuddered; great spasms shook his sweat-slimed frame.

He lay like one dead, while he fought to hold consciousness. Vertigo shivered through his brain. The ledge he pressed against tilted, spun away, dissolved...

And then the rocks dissolved.

And the stone became transparent, clearer than the finest diamond.

And the mountains opened to Kane.

And Kane looked within the mountains.

He saw the treasures of the hills locked in their crypts

He saw the treasures of the hills locked in their crypts of Primal stone—veins of gold and silver, raw gemstones, buried crowns, and chests of coins—and the grim guardians who watched over them.

He saw the graves of the hills, where forgotten skeletons mouldered into dust, and lost tombs whose corpses lay unquiet and imprisoned, and their rotted eyes burned with blue flames as they writhed to return his stare.

He saw the graveless dead of River Cotras—who had been claimed by the river's fury, who had thrown themselves into its flood in futile search for oblivion, who had been flung into its depths to hide the fruits of murder—white scattered bones, and current-tossed skulls, and moss-crusting lairs for fishes and wriggling things.

He saw the lost mines of the ancients, and that which they mined and that which they buried—that which

they sought after and did not find, and that which they feared and could not flee—and the knowledge made him close his eyes and cry out.

He saw caverns that crawled downward and downward, and the blind flapping things that dwelled within them—and the cities that were raised there, where no light would even burn—and the misshapen faces that peered fearfully from slitted windows in towers for which there were no doors.

He saw the black flames of the far abyss, toward which monstrous worms gnawed chaotic tunnels through the rock, seeking the flames of Hell, where as obscene moths they would burst forth to wheel and dart, until their smouldering wings would fail and they would plunge like meteors into the lake of fire.

He saw the hidden creatures of the mountains, risen from their secret dens to hunt by the Demonlord's Moon. Huge, bloated toads that hopped through the fog, flicking forth searching tongues from reeking jaws of acid-venomedfangs. Lonely abandoned cabins, inviting a traveller to shelter—that were neither cabins nor abandoned, and their invitation was not for refuge. Glowing-eyed creatures shaped somewhat like men, who ran on furred limbs, and showed wolves' fangs when they howled. Shambling giants like misshapen apes, yellow-toothed and shovel-taloned—some shaggy as bears, some scaled like snakes—bestial descendants of those who first claimed man's image. Creeping from caverns, naked creatures no longer quite human—filthy, scabrous packs of men, women and mewling children, not half so hideous as the hunger that brought them forth. And that which follows lonely travellers in the dark of the woods, until at last they look behind, and in that moment die (Kane looked upon its face, and terror scarred his soul).

There were others...

And Kane moaned and gnawed his tongue, crushed his fists to his eyes. Until the visions faded into grey, and only the knowledge remained.

He opened his eyes. The rock was solid about him. The fever had broken.

And now a steaming, fetid breath snuffled his body. Eyes like red glowing stars stared balefully down upon his upturned face.

“No, Serberys,” said a voice, “Kane is not ours... yet.”

Kane snarled and flung himself aside. Larger and blacker than any bear of these mountains, the hound of Hell snarled back at him.

“Now we've spoiled his dream,” came the sardonic laugh. “Were you dreaming, Kane?” The Demonlord's onyx-taloned hand rested on his bound's neck. He stood tall and lean and muscular; his garments were black and finely cut to the current mode—full-sleeved shirt and tight trousers, knee boots of soft leather, and a long sword at his belt. A wide black cloak seemed to flap about his shoulders, but Kane knew it was not a cloak.

Kane glared at the majestically evil face and the unwinking black eyes. “If you've come for me, Sathonys, you'll find my steel as ready as ever.”

The Demonlord smiled; mockery robbed his expression of any warmth. “We've met on friendlier terms in past years, Kane. Why do you show your fangs now?”

“We'll play this game no longer,” growled Kane, edging back along the ledge so that the face of the cliff

was close behind him. Serberys's squat bulk completely blocked the trail before him; black tongue licked smoking jowls. He flexed the cramped pain from his sword arm, but did not yet draw his blade.

"But a vassal plays his lord's game for so long as the master wills," mocked Lord Tloluvín, his cloak billowing about him.

"I'm not your vassal." Kane's fists clenched like rocks.

"But you've served me well in the past." The night winds moaned along the escarpment, but his cloak did not swirl in obedience to the wind's caress.

"And you've served me better—and we've fought side by side. But Kane owes allegiance to neither god nor demon, and I'll not be your pawn in this game you play now."

"If not pawn, perhaps prize," the Demonlord laughed. "And yet, you must surely understand that all mortals are but pawns."

"Nor am I mortal."

"Perhaps before dawn you'll be proven wrong on both counts."

This may be my last night, but who comes for me will find no pawn!" warned Kane, the fury of his blue eyes as hellish a flame as the Demonlord's own.

Lord Tloluvín studied the death in Kane's stare. "I've cause enough to respect you, Kane, true, and admire you. At times our battles have been in the same cause."

"You show little gratitude for a comrade in arms."

"Kane! You know better!" protested Lord Tloluvín in sardonic reproof. "I only follow my nature—one you well understand. Sathonys, Tloluvín, Lato, by whatever name—my nature is the same. Only a fool expects loyalty in the Demonlord's friendship."

"Perhaps then you, too, are only a pawn—to your nature, or whatever laws you obey."

The Demonlord's smile was suddenly menacing. Serberys growled like brazen thunder and took half a stride forward on the ledge, "Your wit is as bold as your arrogance, Kane. We'll argue this later, I think.

"But stop to consider my game, since I doubt its nature confuses you. You must admit I've set the gameboard well. For seven years Ionor's festering hate has poisoned this wounded land—twisted her soul and tainted the spirits of those about her. And now to seal her pact of vengeance she will give me the child, the daughter she has tortured herself to keep hating for seven years. Is it not a work of art, Kane? You can admire art such as this, I know. Or do you better appreciate the mastery with which I drew you to me here tonight—held by bonds of fever like a chained sacrifice, with greed and ruthless cruelty like a snarling pack to drive you—and a trail of death and ruin to mark the passage of the hunt."

"If you've set the gameboard for this night, Sathonys," Kane spat back, "you still cannot manipulate all the pieces. Other men you may use as pawns, but not Kane! I'll yield to no predestined fate, and if I fall, I'll die hard and I'll die a free man!"

"Still shaking your bloodstained fist at fate, Kane? But I suppose that is your nature, and I return your

accusation. Before dawn comes we'll speak further on free will, and then I think we'll know better whether this arrogance is vain boast or desperate faith."

Serberys raised his sooty muzzle and bayed. The ravenous howl sent echoes of terror resounding through the night.

Lord Tloluvin stroked his massive shoulders. "Yes, Serberys, I sense it, too. Ionor approaches Raven's Bald with the child, and we must go await her."

His smile was agelessly cruel. "By your leave, Kane—but while we've tarried here, the seeds sown seven years ago in hate, and so carefully nurtured since, are about to flower beneath my moon.

"And did you know that this trail you've so desperately followed ends in a sheer precipice only a short way from here?"

Thunder smashed down over the ledge, like deafening laughter.

Kane stood alone.

X. Demonlord's Moon

At first Kane hoped that the Demonlord had lied. As rage fired new strength through his muscles he plunged recklessly along the now wider trail. For some distance the ledge offered a secure path along the face of the cliff. Kane realized now that he was not on the trail he had thought to follow, but at the same time he was headed in the direction of Raven's Bald. Lord Tloluvin would have known this—had he then lied to make Kane turn back?

The Demonlord had not lied this time.

Kane skidded to a halt, as before him the ledge abruptly fell away. Here the fault in the strata had broken loose, and a great section of the escarpment had sheared off into the River Cotras far below. No trail crossed the black chasm.

Straining to pierce the river mist, Kane peered upward. Above him the cliff marched into the night; below he could hear the muffled roar of River Cotras. From what he remembered of the river gorge in this region, this ledge must be at least a hundred feet from the crest. He was trapped here, unless...

Examining the chasm he thought he discerned a narrow crack which appeared to lead to the area of the fall. If he could find handholds along this crevice, he might be able to reach the slide, where the broken rock might provide an avenue to scale the bluff.

There was, of course, no hope in turning back.

Am I truly a pawn in the Demonlord's game?

The crack in the rock ran perhaps fifty feet—a sheer plummet—before it reached the slide rubble. The stone was damp and slippery, white with frost in places. Bits of splintered rock plugged the crevice every few inches. There scarcely seemed space enough to dig his fingers.

Stretching out, Kane forced his powerful hands into the crevice. He heaved his massive body off the ledge and into space. His giant shoulders bunched and strained; his legs scuffed against the rock, while the river mist swirled up about him from far below.

His movements were rapid, for he knew his overtaxed strength would falter in another moment. Like a great ape, he swung across the escarpment, driving his body on by force of will. Death awaited his first misjudged grip.

The crevice slowly narrowed. Kane found he must support his weight solely by his clawing fingers—and still the crack tightened. Until there was no longer space to thrust his fingers.

Kane's breath grunted an inarticulate curse, but with each second a killing agony, he wasted no time. Hanging perilously by one arm, Kane quickly drew a dagger from his boot. Its flat balanced blade was designed for throwing; whether its steel would support his bulk, Kane had only one way of determining. Using the knife for a piton, Kane jammed it into the crevice and tried his weight.

The tempered steel shivered and grated; the hilt seemed to bend slightly under the tearing stress. But it held. Clinging desperately to the sweaty hilt, Kane jerked its mate from his other boot. He thrust it into the crevice, then swung out with the other blade. Two insignificant shafts of steel and leather were all that supported him above the deadly abyss. It seemed the blades could never endure the strain. They did; Kane's desperate gamble succeeded.

With these makeshift pitons, he struggled across the final few yards to what was relative safety. Reaching the rubble left by the avalanche, he gratefully rested his boots on an outjutting boulder. An hour's rest would seem life saving now, but he knew there was not a minute to spare. Grimly he began to scale the chaos of broken rock which marked the slide.

Stundorn was ill at ease. The blocky mercenary distrusted the strange swirling mist that cloaked, then revealed the autumnal ridges. Nor did he like the eerie shadows that seemed to flash along in the darkness on all sides of them, although time and again a sudden frightened challenge had revealed nothing. *But would shadows make sounds?*

Once more he tried to fight down gnawing fear. He had lost hope of finding Kane in the night—already they had hunted farther than Pleddis had been prepared to. Pleddis had overstretched their lines, spread the search too far. Now they wandered through the darkness in small bands. Stundorn glanced ahead on the ridge as the Demonlord's Moon rose high over Raven's Knob. Dread chilled his spirit. This trail skirting the river gorge was no place to linger tonight.

“Are you sure you know what you're doing?” he demanded of Nattios.

The mountaineer's nerves were, if anything, worse. "There's the tracks. Look at them yourself, and tell me what we're doing. Woman and a child, and not too far ahead. I'll kiss your ass if it's not the woman from the inn and her kid."

"But why would she be on the trail to Raven's Knob?" the other persisted. "No sane errand would take her there tonight of all nights. Hell, you know the stories they tell."

"I didn't say she was going *to* Raven's Knob," Nattios argued. "I said this trail leads *past* Raven's Knob. We don't know where she's really headed."

"Then why don't we turn back?" grumbled one of the other half-dozen men in their party "Damn woman wants to take her kid and risk what's out here tonight, that's her business."

"None of that talk," growled Stundorn, thinking the man had a valid point. But no he would have to face Pleddis, and his captain took a harsh view of cowardice.

"Ionor's out here she's got to have a good reason," he explained. "Could be she's gone to meet Kane. That kid's got hair like Kane, and those blue eyes. Didn't get them from her mother, and we don't know who she calls father. Might be it's Kane—he's been through this range of hills before."

"Seemed ready enough to drink his blood back at the inn," the grumbler persisted.

"Could have been fake," guessed Stundorn. "Kane decided to hole up at Raven's Eyrie after all—and she was fixing them food. Could be Kane's more welcome therethan anyone guessed. Might explain how he managed to slip out of the inn without our knowing it."

"Well, there's something sure funny about that inn," Nattios contributed. Talk drowned out the night's eerie sounds. He hoped the conversation would continue.

They shuffled on a bit farther in silence. The movement from the corner of their eyes seemed to increase; the night sounds edged closer at hand. Bolder.

"How close are we to Raven's Knob?" Stundorn asked, uneasily gazing at the bald spur of rock on the crest of the ridge.

"Pretty close—maybe a mile or so by trail," the tracker hazarded. "Stundorn, you suppose Kane knows you shot him?"

"That ain't certain," protested the man with the arbalest, who had earlier boasted of it.

"Because maybe Kane's dead after all. We ain't none of us seen him since the first. There's some damn weirdthings you hear about Kane, and if he died tonight... Well, there's been dead men before that didn't lie intheir graves."

"Shut up!" Stundorn cursed him, thinking that a dead man would surely take vengeance on his slayer if hecould return from the grave.

"I just wondered if you knew for sure you shot him, and if you knew where the quarrel hit him, that's all. Then maybe we'd know whether Kane's just crippled, orwhether up ahead somewhere there's a dead man waiting..."

“I said, shut up! Keep your mind on the trail.”

“Ain’t nothing there to keep my mind on. A blind man could read these tracks—they’re leading straight along the trail to Raven’s Knob.”

“Vaul! What’s that?” someone gasped.

They froze in their stances to listen. A scraping, scrambling sound not far away...

“It’s something climbing up from the river!” another cried out.

“Fool! That’s a sheer drop!” Nattios swore.

“It’s closer!”

“Then what...?”

With a bloodcurdling howl, Kane flung himself over the last shelf of rock. A man screamed in terror.

Kane’s face was battered, his body and clothing torn filthy, stained with blood. His sword flashed from the scabbard as he cleared the precipice, a yell of animal ferocity twisting his lips. He had sprung out of the abyss as if by sorcery—a vengeful phantom who loomed to giant stature in the terror of that moment. The Demonlord’s Moon cast its red glare upon him, and his killer’s eyes blazed with the sure promise of death.

Stundorn’s shot was wild, for only fear had triggered his weapon. “Kane!” someone bawled in panic. The bounty hunters broke and fled.

With a roar of insane fury, Kane lunged after them. With no thought of danger, he drove them before him. Too long had he been hounded by jackals; the wounded lion had turned to kill.

Stundorn wasted an instant trying to crank the cocking ratchet of his arbalest. The reflex was fatal now, for his comrades had left him to stand alone. As he dropped the useless weapon and groped for his sword, Kane’s hell-driven blade split him almost in half. The others made no attempt to stand before his rush. In frantic haste to escape the bellowing demon, Nattios misjudged the edge of the cliff; his screams were swallowed in the river mists.

Kane ravaged after them. Another mercenary died with Kane’s sword sunk to the hilt through his spine. The survivors split from the trail to plunge into the forest, and Kane leaped after them to tackle the last man. Brutally he pounded the mercenary’s skull against the rocks, again and again, until his fists held only pulp.

Then the red mists of rage parted, and Kane rose from his gory work. From the black trees he heard another man scream once and break off. Under the dark pines, shadows rustled to close on the echo of death. Kane coughed and shook his head. As the killing rage left him, awareness of his danger returned.

Had Pleddis heard the cries, the fury of Kane’s attack? Had someone escaped to warn him of Kane’s presence? The problems seemed only of minor importance; Kane knew a far deadlier menace was closing about him. He stared defiantly at the ridge before him.

There before the red moon rose Raven's Knob. And this trail climbed toward it. Ahead was Ionor with the child— *but how far ahead?*

Kane paused only to snatch up and recock Stundorn's arbalest—for the steel-bowed weapon was accurate to kill at over one hundred fifty yards, and he might still get close enough. . .

Throwing his last strength into his stride, Kane pounded up the trail to Raven's Knob. His sense of hideous danger all but drowned the agony that shrieked through his frame with every step.

Klesst suddenly stopped and tugged at Ionor's cloak. "Mother, let's not walk any farther. I'm tired now."

"Come on, Klesst. It isn't much farther. If you don't stop this whining, I'll slap you."

Mother's slaps stung all the worse because the girl sensed the anger in her blow. "But Mother, I'm frightened out here. The soldiers are way behind us."

"I said, come on!" Ionor jerked her arm forward, then released her hand once Klesst started to follow. She had always tried to keep from touching her. . . It was better that way.

"Mother, I think I remember this place."

"Surely you've played near here often before."

"Never. The other children are afraid to come here, and I don't like to be alone so far in the woods."

Ionor walked resolutely on, impatiently slackening her quick stride to let the child stay beside her. It was not as if Klesst were hers. She was Kane's—and a stolen part of her own flesh. Stolen. Raped and shamed and stolen. Klesst wasn't her daughter—she had been determined on that from the first. She was a cancer which Kane had implanted within her body, and in pain she had been purged of the cancer. Almost. The child was something apart from her. If there had ever been love this would be different, but there had never been love; there never would be love. She would feel no more guilt for Klesst than for a cancer that a surgeon excised and destroyed.

It would be over in another few minutes. Seven years of hate. Klesst would not suffer. Not like she had. . .

"Mother, I think this is the place in my dream."

"Hush, Klesst."

"No, Mother! I know it's the same place. That great big rock up there is where the black dog first appears, and the black man who walks behind him." Klesst's voice rose in sharp fear.

Ionor frowned at the girl. She had hoped to avoid physical contact— *physical force*—with the child, though she had a length of cord under her cloak if she needed it "Don't be afraid, Klesst. When you get to that big rock and see that there's no black hound and his master, then you won't have those silly

nightmares any more.”

“I’m still scared,” Klesst whispered, her eyes round and frightened.

“Come on, quickly now.”

Klesst walked slowly on. She did not want to anger Mother. She used to think that if she never made Mother angry again, then Mother might forget the awful thing she once had done—although what this crime might have been, she never understood. Of late Klesst had lost hope of making Mother ever forget.

Then her owl-like eyes stared at the barren spur of rock. Ionor had forgotten—if she ever knew—how well Klesst could see in the dark.

“Mother!” screamed Klesst, breaking away. “I can see them! It’s the black dog and the black man! They’re waiting in the shadow of those big rocks up ahead! Mother! The black dog sees me, too! Can’t you see how red his eyes glow?”

“Come here, damn you!” shouted Ionor, reaching for the cord. In her urgent need to catch the terrified girl, she lunged and stumbled over a root. “Come here!” she yelled, as she sprawled after the retreating child.

It was the last fragment of horror for Klesst. She whirled and dashed back down the trail, utter panic lending horrible impetus to her childish stride.

Ionor called once more, then saved her breath for overtaking Klesst. The girl could not stay ahead of her for very long.

But terror gave her strength, so that Klesst flew headlong down the path, running faster than she ever had. She could hear Ionor’s boots drawing closer from behind, and in her mind Mother, the black hound, and its master all merged into one onrushing phantom of dread.

A giant, diseased apple tree overhung the trail. The last of a blighted orchard that once had stood along this slope, the huge tree reached over the path with grotesque and nightmarish limbs. The sick-sweet odor of rotting apples hung under its shadow like the smell of state flowers in a graveyard. It had frightened Klesst when first they passed beneath its clutching branches.

Now as she rushed past it, her feet skidded on the rotted fruit. Klesst howled and pitched flying onto the decay-strewn ground. The jar of her fall left her no breath to cry out.

Desperately she tried to scramble back up to run. Too late. A frenzy of motion in the darkness, and Ionor’s cold hand knotted in her disordered hair. Still trying to draw breath, Klesst was yanked to her feet.

Ionor slapped her, hard. “Now I’ll show you what good it is to run!” she panted. And she drew the girl’s wrists together, fumbled with the cord.

Klesst watched mutely as her hands were tied, still tooterrified to grasp what was happening to her. She wondered if Mother meant to whip her like once she did Sele .

There was a scuff of boot on stone, then another silhouette joined the apple tree’s contorted shadow.

It's the black man, thought Klesst. *He's come with his hound. Mother will give me to him...*

"Kane!" snarled Ionor, leaping up in fury.

There was fury in Kane's eyes.

The arbalest in his arms shuddered.

Ionor shrieked in clawing agony as the iron-barbed quarrel tore into her belly and flung her back against the tree. She should have fallen then; instead she hung there, writhing in torment. At point-blank range the quarrel had drilled through her spine and sunk into the gnarled trunk.

She struggled frantically to break free, but her strength suddenly failed. Hate was slower to desert her, and she spat curses through her bubbling lips as she died. And finally there was an end even to her hate. Her slumped figure hung limply from the apple tree, impaled on the spike like a shrike's prey on a thorn.

Clumsily—for his chest pounded with agony, and scarlet mists blurred his vision—Kane gathered up his sobbing child and wrapped her in his wolfskin cloak. "Well played. Kane!" came sardonic congratulations. "I had thought the game won."

Klesst buried her face in Kane's shoulder. Kane warily shifted his burden away from swordhilt. The Demonlord and his hound stood before him on the trail.

"Do you still say I'm your pawn?" he growled. "There stands your pawn. Your pact is forfeit, and you'll have to play at my game if you think to claim this prize!"

"Your game, Kane?" mocked Sathonys. "I think not. And perhaps I was wrong to call you a pawn. We'll play the game another day, and then we'll see whether Kane is truly master of his fate, or simply fool of luck.

"Still, I won't say this outcome displeases me. Our souls are like matched blades fired in the same forge, Kane. After all these centuries, I believe I'd miss you, and you've served me well so many times."

Kane's eyes blazed in anger.

"As an ally, of course," the Demonlord amended, with a sarcastic salute.

He touched the hound's misshapened head. "Come, Serberys. The moon is growing old, and our friend Kane has led so many souls into our domain tonight. We must not delay our hunt any longer, as I see my creatures have become quite hungry."

Serberys opened his slavering jaws in a baying note of horror.

Hound and master vanished into the night.

Kane almost found pity for those who had dared to pursue him beneath the Demonlord's Moon. But pity was too rare in Kane to bestow upon his enemies.

Through the throbbing haze of pain, Weed felt himself lowered to the floor. He waited blindly for the torture to take some new direction, only thankful that the agony of his wrenched shoulders had let up. Then a knife sheared through his bonds.

He opened his swollen eyes. It was Kane, although it took a moment to be sure. The outlaw leader was a grisly sight to see this side of Hell.

Kane pushed a bottle of brandy into his mouth. Weed tried to take it in his hands but found them too numb to respond. The brandy was fire on his torn lips and broken teeth, but he swallowed greedily as Kane tipped the flask.

In a moment he had come to himself enough to note the torn bodies of his guards strewn about the room. Kane had descended on them in a murderous rush of fury, but Weed had hung unconscious through it all.

“Can you ride?” Kane demanded.

Weed glanced at Kane’s face, then quickly looked away. “I guess so,” he grunted, feeling cracked ribs as he struggled to stand. “I guess so. Give me a minute to get my breath.”

“There’re horses saddled and ready in the stable,” Kane told him. “The guards won’t bother you.”

“Thoem! What’s happened?” muttered Weed, swaying for balance. “Where’s Pleddis and all his men? They all went out to look for you...”

A chilling howl stirred the night winds. It sounded like the bay of a hound as he closes on his quarry. It was not pleasant to hear.

“I think they found other hunters already out there,” said Kane.

He thrust a bulging srip into Weed’s hands. It was heavy, but the weight of gold was one that Weed’s tingling fingers found strength to close upon. “Here’s gold,” Kane told him. “Use it as you need it. When you’re strong enough to ride, take Klesst here and go. Dawn will soon break, and you’ll be safe enough—besides, Sathonys owes me for a game. Take Klesst with you to Obray’s Station—that’s well north of the Combine’s authority, and no one will follow. Take good care of the girl, and when I join you shortly, I’ll share my cache with you. I know that interests you.”

Weed wiped the blood from his face, not realizing until later that Kane had known his designs. “Sure, Kane. Whatever you say. But what about you? Pleddis is going to return any minute now...”

“I’ll see to my end,” Kane grimly vowed. “You make damn certain about yours.”

Dawn was greying the skies, the Demonlord’s Moon had plunged beneath the black ridges, when Pleddis pushed open the door of Raven’s Eyrie. He staggered into a common room, his garments ragged and bloody, his face more colorless than ever. His limbs trembled, and there was gore on his sword no

human veins had spilled. He lost his laugh.

“Demons!” he blurted out with a choked voice. In a dazed stupor, he lurched across the center of the room. “Devils from the hills! Vaul! The things were everywhere! Snapping, clawing, leaping out on you from the trees and the shadows and the rocks! Too many—reaching out from all around us! Couldn’t make a stand!”

His eyes still shone with horror. “And that hound! That hideous black hound! I saw it drag Eriall down as he ran! Vaul! I can still hear its baying! Drove me like a hunted fox across the ridges—but I outran it, made it back alive!”

He paused for breath, and awareness of his surroundings came to him. The huge inn lay in total silence.

“Where—where is everyone?” Pleddis called out.

“I’m right here,” said Kane, rising out of the shadow.