

Bloodstone

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For John F. Mayer--

Colleague and friend,

Brother in infamy...

Contents

Prologue

I Death by Firelight

II The Tower at Time's Abyss

III Statecraft in Selonari

- IV A Stranger Brings Gifts
- V The Rotting Land
- VI When Elder Gods Wake
- VII A Priest Comes to Breimen
- VIII Death in the Fog
- IX War Eagles Gather
- X A Stranger Returns
- XI Thunderclouds of War
- XII Spoils of Victory
- XIII She-Wolf's Fangs
- XIV Flight into Nightmare
- XV Lord of Bloodstone
- XVI When Death Is Unmasked
- XVII What Manner of Man
- XVIII The Wolf Lays Plans
- XIX Dreams in Arellarti
- XX Night of Bloodstone
- XXI No Tears in Selonari
- XXII The Vaults of the Temple
- XXIII Giants in the Dark Sky
- XXIV The Final Mask Falls
- XXV When Mad Dreams Die
- Epilogue

Prologue

For miles uncounted the forest stood supreme. Giant trees reached their branches heavenward, fighting for sunlight and fresh air. Beneath their dense foliage existed another world than that of the open sky above--the twilight of the forest floor. There the cool gloom was broken only by scattered rays of sunlight that crept through the ceiling above, to melt upon the thick bed of leaf mold and pine needles which covered the floor. No undergrowth flourished, except in spots where an arboreal giant had fallen and torn a gap in the forest roof, through which yellow sunlight streamed. Then for a short time a cerement of underbrush might thrive on the rich humus beside the decaying trunk, until the branches above refilled the gulf and strangled the life-giving rays.

But the floor was far from a lifeless desert. A myriad of animal life, great and small, scrambled through the forest. Insects rustled through the carpet and up the trunks of the great trees. Serpents glided along the ground searching for rodents, whose dens were among the tangled roots. Several species of small furry animals picked their way through caves and grooves in the moss-hung debris of fallen branches and cast-off leaves of many seasons. High above, birds chattered gregariously, and somewhere a squirrel cursed in rage over some unseen affront. In the distance a crow croaked nervously and was still.

The doe heard its half-hearted call of warning and froze in the shadows, her fawn pressed against her flanks, shivering on extraordinary legs. Her wide eyes swiveled in alarm, and her taut ears tensed for sounds of danger. Cautiously she drew breath through sensitive nostrils, seeking a scent of wolf or bear or other predator. For minutes she paused, searching for some evidence of danger. None appeared, and visions of meadow clover beckoned. She stepped from the shadow of the trees once again, her fawn close behind.

Packed loam of the path recorded her pointed hooves but a few steps when a hissing arrow tore through her ribs. Gasping in agony, the doe staggered, then plunged along the path in blind flight. The fawn paused only a second before instinctive terror supplanted bewilderment, and on his stilt-like legs he pounded, after his mother. A chorus of crows caught the scent of blood, of fear, and raised a raucous protest.

The hunter jumped from his concealment alongside the trail, another arrow nocked and ready. Bounding onto the gametrail, his patient eyes recognized the stream of blood, and he grinned jubilantly. "Lung at least--maybe heart, too by the blood! Run while you can, bitch--you won't go far!" He drew a long knife and followed confidently the glistening trail.

Her hoofprints quickly left the path, but marks of the doe's passage were obvious by the crimson blotches splashed upon the forest floor. As the hunter surmised, she had not run more than a few hundred yards before death pulled her down. She lay in a sudden depression in the ground--a cavity ripped from the floor a few years earlier when an enormous tree had been uprooted. Her breath rattled now through red-foamed nostrils, and her eyes seemed already glazed.

He clambered into the depression gingerly and cut her throat. Wiping the knife across her flank, the hunter cast about for the fawn. No sign of him. Something would get him by morning, probably, so at least he would not starve. He felt some slight remorse over killing a doe with fawn, but the day had been long, and his family in Breimen came first. Besides, he was paid to bring in deer for the market, not to observe forest idylls.

He sat against the bank with a tired but satisfied grunt, wiped his face on a dirty sleeve, and looked about him. A minute's rest--then gut her, rig up a drag, and pull the carcass into Breimen. And that would about finish it for this afternoon.

The bowl in which the huntsmen rested was several yards across, for the tree that had wrenched loose was ancient one of immense size. Bare soil still scarred the depression, although material had begun to slide down from the edges. Something glittered upon the bottom of the hole. A lance of sunlight shone down from above to spear something bright, embedded in the humus--some object that cast back a silver reflection to the hunter's eyes. Mildly intrigued, he rose to get a closer look. The object that lay there in the dirt made him grunt in puzzlement and squat down to make astonished examination.

A ring lay embedded in the dirt. Around it the loam was streaked with white, crumbling material that seemed to be rotted bone, and reddish splotches which might represent rusted iron intermingled. Brushing away the loose surface, he discerned a few greenish lumps, recognizable only as corroded brass or copper. The body of some ancient warrior, possibly--although how long it had moldered here beneath the forest defied his imagination. Long enough for bones and accoutrements to crumble away--and the tree that had overgrown the grave was centuries old.

With unsteady hand the hunter pulled the ring free of its bed of tainted clay and brushed loose the tenacious fragments that encased it. He spat and polished it against his leather trouser leg, then raised it to his eyes for appraisal. The metal was silvery in appearance, but seemed far harder--and silver should have tarnished black with antiquity. It seemed to be set with a tremendous cabochon-cut bloodstone--rich, deep-green stone with red veins traced throughout its depths. But it was a superb example of that gem, he judged, holding it to a ray of light. For the colors were somewhat more intense, and there appeared to be a quality of translucency to the stone that made it distinct from the normally opaque gem. The stone was huge--abnormally large for a ring--and it seemed to fuse cunningly into its setting. Carefully he scraped free a last few stubborn flakes of bone-streaked clay from the inside of the ring and held it before his finger. Whoever had worn this ring lost centuries past must have been a giant, for its girth was several sizes too great for any normal finger to hold.

Uneasily the hunter recalled legends told by the Selonari of giants and demons who had stalked the forests even before they had settled here. And there were tales among his own people regarding the savage Rillyti, who supposedly never strayed far beyond the slimy shelter of their swamp.

But the hunter had a solid, practical mind. Saying a prayer to Ommem for protection, and to the spirit of the rotted skeleton for pardon, he dropped the ring into his pouch. Mechanically he began to gut his kill, all the while speculating pleasantly as to the price his find might bring him at the jewelers' market in Breimen.

Death by Firelight

An ominous black shadow in the leaping firelight, the big man crouched enswathed in his cloak and moodily sipped wine from a crockery mug lost in his huge fist. His close-fitting shirt and trousers of dark leather were freshly stained with sweat and blood, and the right sleeve was rolled back from a scarlet-streaked bandage encircling an arm thick with corded muscle. A belt bright with silver studs crossed his massive chest, holding fast an empty sword scabbard behind his powerful right shoulder. The sword itself stood before him, its point embedded in a gnarled tree root. Absently running a knuckle over the short red beard that framed his rather brutal face, he brooded over the many nicks and red brown smears that defaced the blade and cast shadows of violent combat by the flickering light. Seemingly he was oblivious to the others as they greedily spread out the loot to divide among themselves.

The Ocalidad Mountain Range that guarded the northern coasts of the forestland now called Wollendan had been infamous for its bandits long before the blond seafarers of the coast migrated through its passes to carve out cities from the great forests of the south. The dark-haired forest-dwellers who grudgingly yielded ground to their iron-guarded advance had made free use of the countless caves and unassailable fortresses the mountains provided, before the intruders had ever landed on their shores. Never in the memory of those who held the land had it been safe for a caravan to cross the Ocalidad Mountains. Yet commerce must flow from seacoast inland and back again, and the rich trade with the fabled cities across the seas made the gamble worth the effort. So men with wealth crossed the mountains, where men with swords waited to strip them of it, and the history of their measures and countermeasures was as long and colorful as it was bloody.

Earlier today this band had attacked a somewhat modest, pack train crossing from the south under a small guard of armed men. The ensuing battle had ended little better than a draw for the bandits, who lost a good number of men before the survivors of the caravan broke through the ambush to safety. In fleeing, however, several loads of goods had been left behind by the merchants, and the brigands were content to fall upon this booty and abandon further efforts against the remainder of the caravan. Retreating to their camp as nightfall overtook them, the bandits were now engaged in the difficult and dangerous business of dividing the spoils.

"A fine lot of jewelry here in this one pack," observed their leader, a scar-faced giant named Hechon. "Someone's out a bundle of money here. Wonder what it was all going for. Hey... maybe all the rumors are true about Malchion hiring some more troops to attack Selonari."

"That old tale's been blowing around these hills in one form or another long as I can think back," scoffed someone.

The contents of the jewel merchant's bag were carefully poured out on a blanket, where they tossed sparkles of firelight back into the circle of greedy eyes. A dozen pairs of hands twitched in eagerness to seize the treasure, but the bandits held back while Hechon fingered through the loot calculatingly. His

would be the final word as to how everything would be divided among his band.

"Damn! Here's something interesting now!" muttered Hechon. A three-fingered hand reached down and lifted a ring into the firelight. Experienced eyes weighed the object. "Huh! Thought this looked strange! Ring's way too big for most people, and I can't quite call this metal. Not right for silver--too hard. Wonder if this is maybe platinum--that's a costly metal and hard as iron. I've heard tell they work it up north or somewhere. Thought this gem was bloodstone at first; too, but it don't look like any I ever seen. See how the light seems to shine into it a ways... you can almost follow the veins of red down into the gem."

"Let me see that ring." The big man seated apart from them spoke at last; Hechon's discovery of the ring had aroused him from his brooding aloofness.

Eyes turned at his low voice. Hechon looked toward him in shrewd calculation, and after a pause he tossed the bloodstone ring to him. "Sure, Kane. Take a look, then. If you're too tired to come stand around with the rest of us."

Kane caught the object in his left hand and held it before his eyes. In silence he studied the ring, carefully turning it about in the light, as if he saw a legend inscribed on its surface. He seemed lost in thought for a long while, then announced abruptly, "I want this ring as part of my share of the booty."

Hechon rankled at his tone. He had had second thoughts about accepting Kane into his band since the red-haired stranger had come to him two months before. He brought along a handful of others--all that survived when their old gang of outlaws had been surprised by a troop of mercenaries sent out by the coastal cities to make the mountain passes safe for commerce. Where Kane had come from before that, Hechon neither knew nor cared. However, of Kane's deadly skill in battle the bandit leader did know, for the awesome might of the stranger's sword arm quickly made his name feared throughout the Ocalidad Mountains. And although Hechon immediately recognized the threat Kane posed to his leadership, he had judged his position among his own men too secure for the other to challenge outright... and in a raid Kane was worth a dozen lesser rogues.

Now Kane's confident appropriation of the bizarre ring struck resentment in Hechon's shrewd mind. Best to assert command now, he decided, before the others began to accept Kane's wishes as law in other matters. "I decide how the take gets split up," he growled. "Anyway, that's a valuable ring, and I've taken a liking to it myself."

Kane frowned slightly and continued to examine the bloodstone ring speculatively. "Bloodstone is scarcely a precious gem, and this ring's value is only that of a curiosity," he offered reasonably. "Still, I find it somewhat intriguing, and it looks like it might not be much too large for my hand. So maybe it's just a whim, but I want it. As to its dubious monetary worth, I'll take a big chance and accept this ring in lieu of the rest of my share of the spoils. That's leaving you others with an extra slice of obvious value to split up."

"You're not fool enough to gamble like that unless you maybe got some other ideas on that ring's worth," Hechon pointed out, now genuinely suspicious. "And like I say, I'm boss here, and I decide who gets what. So pass that damn ring back, Kane, and we'll get on with business. You'll take what I decide on, and right now I'm telling you that ring's going to be mine." The menace in his tone was a grating note.

Hechon glowered at Kane obstinately. Around them the other outlaws watched in nervous silence, almost imperceptibly shuffling away from the two. Abelin, Hechon's lanky lieutenant, carefully wiped his hands on his thighs and moved them out of Kane's sight, trying to read some signal in his leader's face.

They would back him, Hechon decided.

In the strained silence even the voices of the night creatures seemed hushed and distant. Kane's eyes glowed with blue fire in the flickering light, cold death laughing derisively in their depths. Hechon had always felt a chill when he looked into those eyes, the eyes of a born killer. Uneasily he remembered the insane light that stirred in those eyes when Kane stood red with slaughter over those who fell before his blade in battle. Held next to his cheek in his left hand, the evil gleam of the bloodstone seemed to match Kane's uncanny stare. Even its scarlet veins seemed phosphorescent in the shadow of the firelight.

And Hechon knew Kane was not going to return the ring. Cold realization came that there was no course left him now. If he relented, Kane would have outfaced him before his men, and his command over them would soon change fists. Kane's challenge must be answered, now and forever.

Kane seemed immobile, but Hechon knew the deadly speed with which he could strike. His sword stood before him in easy reach, impaled in a root. Narrowly Hechon watched Kane's left hand--his sword arm--but Kane still stroked his cheek with the ring. The bandit leader shrugged. "Well, if you want the damned ring that much I guess you can keep it as your share." He seemed to relax, and he grinned about him at the others. As he did, Hechon caught Abelin's eye for a significant moment, and his fingers spread in an evident gesture of helplessness. "After all, Kane," he continued, "it's worth more to me to keep you..."

Abelin's hand suddenly flicked to his neck and flew back balancing a long-bladed knife from the sheath that hung between his shoulders. The bandit lieutenant's long arm straightened in unbroken motion to hurl the blade at Kane's chest.

But Kane had not fallen prey to Hechon's apparent acquiescence. Knowing the bandit chieftain's cunning, Kane had followed the other's eyes and caught the silent death sentence he had signed Abelin to carry out. And although Kane was left-handed, years of training had made his right arm almost as proficient as the other.

In the fraction of a second that Abelin required to send his blade flashing for Kane's heart, Kane hurled his powerful body to one side. As he leaped from his crouched position, the right hand that had strayed toward his right boot lashed out with the knife it found hidden there. Striking like a coiled serpent, Kane hurled his dagger across the fire like an arrow of light. Abelin's blade hissed past him as he twisted and thudded against the base of a tree. Still bending forward with his cast, the outlaw coughed in startled pain as Kane's knife drove its point through his heart.

Kane's lunge brought him to his feet even as he had thrown the knife. As the bandit lieutenant crumpled to his knees to realize that death had claimed him, Kane caught up his sword in his left hand, dropping the ring to the ground, and swung his boot into the fire. A blinding, searing wave of coals and burning embers exploded over the stunned bandits, driving them back in pain and confusion.

Hechon was reaching for his sword hilt the instant Abelin had drawn his knife. Throwing up his free arm to ward off the burning cloud of fire and ashes, the bandit leader whipped out the blade with frantic haste. Only barely did he raise his guard in time to turn back Kane's thrust.

Kane leaped across the fire, sword slashing like a fiery brand. Avoiding Hechon's return thrust, he struck again, swinging powerful blows that all but tore his opponent's hilt from numbed fingers. Forced to the defensive, Hechon backed away from Kane and strove desperately to stave off the attack until his men could shake off their surprise and come to his aid--if they would. Kane gave them no time to decide. As Hechon retreated around the scattered coals, something turned under his boot, causing him to sway off

balance for only an instant. In that fraction of a heartbeat, Kane's sword eluded Hechon's failing guard and pierced his shoulder. Driven back by the blow, Hechon was helpless to block Kane's follow-through. A second later his smashed corpse flopped against the earth, spewing a torrent of crimson over the green-jeweled ring that glowed evilly in his dying vision.

Swiftly Kane scooped up the bloodstone ring from the darkened earth and straightened to face the other outlaws. Weapons drawn, they were milling about in confusion, uncertain what course was theirs to follow now that their leaders were slain.

"All right!" Kane roared, his reddened sword raised menacingly. "This ring is mine, and I'll kill any other damn fool who disputes my claim! Split the rest of the loot up among yourselves now! I've got what I want, and I'm leaving! Anyone who wants a quick trip to hell can try to stop me!"

No hand was raised against him. Retrieving his dagger and a handful of gold coins, Kane mounted his horse and thundered away into the darkness. Behind the jackals quarreled over his leavings.

II

The Tower at Time's Abyss

The stones beneath his horse's hooves assumed an almost reassuring familiarity now, and Kane all at once was uncertain whether fifty years or as many days had passed since last he had ridden along this ridge. Trees grew sparse and stunted from the cracked and wind-sculpted rock, throwing odd shadows against the orange-red sun in the west. The wind that whipped through his hair and flapped the wolfskin cloak about his shoulders bore with it the cold scent of the sea, which verged as a blue ribbon into the hazy eastern horizon. Faint murmur of distant waves underscored the rush of the wind, and sharp cries of soaring birds rose in broken descant. These far-off dark shapes that hung and wheeled on the wind--were they ravens, hawks, or gulls? Or were they even birds? Kane was too concerned with keeping to the unfrequented and all but obliterated trail to give them further attention.

The ruins of a low wall crept into view, more sharply demarcating the ancient roadway he followed. Tumbled heaps of gray stone suggested fallen dwellings, and an occasional roofless structure now huddled against the crest of the ridge. As Kane rode closer to the ridge's summit, he could recognize the familiar details of her tower--a sweeping basalt spire that jutted perilously above a sheer plummet thousands of feet over the coastal plains far below. It seemed incredible that this tower had not plunged off into the abyss centuries ago, but Kane knew its fragility to be only illusion. For the about this tower had lain in ruins long before the great ocean that once surged mightily against the mountain wall had

receded, and still the tower had stood without change.

Lights began to glow within the tower's high windows, Kane observed, as he guided his mount along the final few hundred yards of cracked roadway that led to the summit. More strongly now the familiarity of these surroundings impressed him, imbuing him with a curious sense almost of homecoming. The eerie changelessness of her world was all the more strange to Kane because of the restless state of flux in which he perceived existence. It seemed to him that in Jhaniikest's tower there existed a focus of timelessness within the ever shifting patterns of the remainder of the universe, a refuge, from time itself.

The tower gates swung open as he approached, throwing a mist of yellow light into the twilight that drafted over the ridges. Phantom guardsmen of a long-dead race clashed curious spears in stiff salute, and Kane's horse rolled frightened eyes and nickered nervously. Tired from days of hard riding, Kane eased himself from the saddle and led his snorting mount to the shelter of a roofless building near the tower's base. Tethering him, Kane saw that there was fodder enough growing through the cracked floor to occupy the animal until he could tend to him more fully.

Through slit-pupiled eyes the guardsmen watched impassively as Kane entered the tower portals. Behind him the doors closed with only a faint rasp, and he wondered when they had last swung open to admit a guest. Torches set along the wall afforded illumination as he crossed the entrance hall and ascended the stone stairwell that led to the levels above.

Jhaniikest stood by the head of the stairs, her half-folded wings framing the wide doorway. A smile of welcome drew thin red lips over needle-sharp white teeth as she held out her hand to him. "Kane! I saw you coming from above! All afternoon you've plodded along. I thought you had lost your way... maybe forgotten Jhaniikest over the years! I think it's been a century since last I saw you!"

"Not nearly that long, I'm certain," Kane protested, as he knelt to kiss the long-fingered, deceptively fragile hand. "Actually, I was thinking on the ride up that it had only been a few months since my last visit."

She laughed, an uncanny, high-pitched trill. "Kane... you're a total loss as a lover! Do you always tell your ladies that the years you've spent away from their presence have passed like days?" Her wide silver eyes appraised him in frank curiosity, the black vertical pupils almost circular in the darkened room. "You seem unchanged to me, Kane," she judged. "But then you always look the same--just like my shadow servants here. Come... sit beside, me and tell me what things you've seen. I've already had the wine and hors d'oeuvres set out."

Kane accepted a flagon of wine from a slender serving girl whose bones were long drifting with the dust. Lips set in concentration as she balanced the heavy tray and its fragile contents, she seemed to him fully alive; he even thought he could discern the quick pulse of breath stirring the fine tawny fur of her breasts. Jhaniikest's sorcery was potent, he mused as he sipped the wine--demon wine conjured out of some unguessable cellar.

"Brought you something I thought you might enjoy," he announced, tugging out the pouch he wore beneath vest and shirt. Fumbling through its contents a moment, Kane withdrew a tiny packet wrapped in soft leather and offered it to her.

Jhaniikest caught it up with eager curiosity and ran her finger over the packet in brief speculation before she sliced through its tie with a sharp talon and spread the wrapping apart. "A ring!" She laughed in delight. "Kane... what a lovely sapphire!" Murmuring vague sounds of pleasure, she turned the splendid blue star sapphire about in the light, trying it on one finger, then another, admiring the effect.

She was an uncanny creature, Jhaniikest. Ageless offspring of a priestess of a vanished prehuman race and the winged god they had worshipped. Sorceress, priestess, demigoddess--for centuries she had lived in this tower that once had been temple for the race who had dwelt here. She had preserved this tower through magic while the remainder of the ancient city crumbled into ruins, and she had summoned from death the shades of her people to serve her here. A goddess without a heaven. Or perhaps this was her heaven, for she had lived in this desolate tower for centuries, occupying herself with such unimaginable designs and philosophies as only the elder gods could comprehend. Kane had discovered her partly by chance a great many years before.

She knelt on her couch with her long legs drawn under her, membranous wings folded but stirring restlessly, as if buffeted by unperceived winds. Aside from wings, Jhaniikest was not too dissimilar in form from a human. Her figure was almost that of a slender girl in mid-teens, although her limbs were disproportionately long, which raised her height to somewhat over six feet. Her chest seemed unnaturally deep from the thick bands of muscle that spread from the base of her wings down across shoulder and back and around to a keel-like breastbone. Small, firm breasts softened the sharp lines of her chest. Silver-white fur covered her entire body--fur short and fine as on a cat's face. Across her scalp and down her neck her hair grew long and billowy, a proud mane that any court beauty would envy. Her face was narrow, with piquant features, and there was an elfish point to her ears and chin. Jeweled ornaments glittered upon the silvery fur of her person--her only attire other than a golden belt of gems and bright silk scarves.

Her wings were Jhaniikest's most marvelous feature. Silver-furred bat's wings that reached from shoulder to hip and spanned to twenty feet when spread. Furled, they stood from her back like an ermine cape. Extended in flight, they shimmered opalescent in the sun. The inhuman strength of her compact and hollow-boned frame easily lifted her into the air, where Jhaniikest could soar for hours through the desolate skies. A winged goddess of a vanished realm.

The sapphire pleased Jhaniikest, as Kane, aware of her love of bright jewelry, had known it would. The gem, one of the finest he had gleaned in several years of banditry, was something her sorcery could easily surpass. But the goddess rarely received offerings in these years, and Kane had understood the delight his gift would bring Jhaniikest.

"What brings you to my realm once more, Kane?" Jhaniikest asked presently. "Don't tell me again that you rode this far just to give me jewelry and bring diversity to my days. It's flattering, but I know you too well. Kane's motives are never those he proclaims through a smile."

Kane winced. "Small thanks for my gallantry. Actually, though, it was a ring that brought me to your tower. A ring that seemed familiar when I first examined it. Not that I had ever seen it before, but a ring that I seemed to have heard of, or read about at some time in the past. Perhaps I acted rashly in acquiring the bauble, but if my memory hasn't begun to wander, this ring is the gateway to a world far beyond the dawn of mankind!

"I've left some things with you in the past, Jhaniikest. Priceless objects that I thought you might find interesting--that I knew I would lose myself before long. You will remember there were several old books--ancient volumes of sorcerous knowledge of the like seldom seen by others of my race. Once in studying these unhallowed manuscripts, I seem to recall, I found reference to a bloodstone ring... rather, a gem that resembled bloodstone. I've ridden several days to trace down that memory--although I've been planning for a long time to work my way around to visit you once again."

Jhaniikest tossed her head and laughed ruefully. "I see your ambitions are as boundless as ever, Kane.

Well, I've kept all your things stuffed away somewhere. Those books are on the top level where you last saw them, probably, and you can page through them later. But before you turn scholar, you first shall entertain me. It's been a long while since I've had a visitor from the world outside my own, and my companions here have little to say that's of sparkling novelty."

Later that night, Kane followed Jhaniikest to the upper levels of the tower and into one of the chambers where she had gathered together many of the items she used in her own unfathomable pursuits. Finding the collection of scrolls and strangely bound volumes he sought, Kane seated himself at a lamp-lit table and began to examine the material, mumbling under breath as he read.

Jhaniikest swung open the wide tower window. A gust of cold mountain wind stole through the gap and fanned, the torchlight to a crackling slant of yellow. Twisting onto the ledge, she leaned outward over the abyss, fearless in her precarious perch. Moonlight glistened silver over her mane, glowed through the half-spread gossamer wings that curtained the aperture. Softly she sang a chant of high, tinkling syllables, watching with head a tilt to see if Kane would wander in attention. But his brow remained set in an anxious frown as he concentrated over the crumbling pages of arcane glyphs penned by ancient and curious hands--although twice he gazed unseeingly toward her face as he distractedly reached for another volume. Suddenly his concentration deepened over the yellowed tome he was examining. Carefully he set aside Alorri-Zrokros's Book of the Elders and removed the bloodstone ring ' the pouch about his neck.

Laughter rose from his throat. Laughter reckless, triumphant in its rising tone. Laughter that unsettled the dust of silent years in the tower.

Startled at his outburst, Jhaniikest slipped to Kane's peering over his broad shoulder to discover the source of the jest.

"It's here--all here--as I remembered!" Kane pointed toward the time-stained page. "My memory has not dulled through the years... although Alorri-Zrokros's prose clings to any mind! Can you read this hand? It's an inferior transcription. See--there lies the history this ring--a tale of an Earth centuries forgotten and of those who dwelt under stars unknown to man! There... the history of Bloodstone! Shall I read to you? Would you hear of the unimaginable power that waits to be unlocked by this ring?"

Harsh voice broken in eagerness, Kane translated the scrawled writing. Once Jhaniikest interrupted with a sharp exclamation of understanding. "Kane! Don't attempt this! I see only death for you in this madness! Let this ancient power lie buried!"

But Kane rushed on.

The bloodstone gleamed... glowed under the intensity of inhuman gaze. Deep within the green depths glinted subdued evil with the sullen promise of dawn.

III

Statecraft in Selonari

The knocking broke cadence with the throb of his skull, then seemed to drift apart, a persistent drumming now accompanied by strident chant. Then the lingering webs of sleep dissolved, and Dribeck recognized the summons at his chamber door.

"Milord! Milord Dribeck! It's well past the hour you told me to awaken you!" It was his chamberlain who tormented him. "Milord! It's close to noon! You said you must be aroused before noon! Milord, are you awake? Say something so I can be sure--"

"Go to hell, Asbraln!" Dribeck croaked. "I've been up..." He tossed back the fur robes as the knocking subsided. Unsteadily he sat up and swung his legs onto the floor. Dozens of needle-pronged flashes crackled through his skull, and he pressed his forehead against his palms, leaning forward with elbows balanced on knees. Tenderly he massaged, breathing a sigh compounded of curses and groans, until the ache retreated. He became conscious that something unclean had died as morn during the night.

Shenan's tits! That had been a night! All of Selonari must have lain awake at the noise! The major part of his gentry and mercenary captains had sat down to banquet. In the terminal stages of hangover, Dribeck regretted the improvident beakers of wine he had emptied. It was ruinous to match his brawny vassals cup for cup, but then his hold on their respect dictated that he stand in their eyes as full a man as any, for all his unassuming stature. In truth, though, Dribeck admitted that prudence had not tainted the wine's compelling savor at the time.

His face felt greasy, Dribeck noted, as he pushed back his shoulder-length black hair and stroked smooth a tangled mustache. His jaw was convincingly stubbled, although to his chagrin its growth was too sparse even at 28 years to furnish a respectable beard. A great shame, that--a beard would add a note of strength, of dashing to his somewhat gaunt features. Not a weak profile by any measure--women found it virile enough, and men described his face as "watchful" or "quick" or "cunning." Strong enough an image for the ruler of a city-state, although Dribeck might hope for one more `formidable in these times.

Shivering, he rose to his feet and pushed groggily through the curtains enclosing his bed. Pentri snorted in her sleep and half rolled to his vacated place. She was still asleep, or feigning it well--her exhaustion was gratifying, as Dribeck recalled her teasing laughter at his drunken loveplay. The rumpled furs revealed a long stretch of soft hip, but he checked his move to adjust the covering and stepped away with curtain askew. Pentri could catch cold, and Asbraln could eat his heart out. Cursing as his foot tangled in a discarded garment, Dribeck wrestled a robe over his spare frame and shuffled to the door.

Asbraln, a legacy of Dribeck's father and his tutor at arms and statecraft in younger days, swept into his lord's chamber. Glass crunched under his boot, and he regarded with raised eyebrow the strewn fragments of wine bottle. "You stated last night..." he began. His eyes widened for a second as they peered past the disarrayed curtains, and he turned his gaze quickly from the distraction. "Ah... you

announced your intention to rise early to speak with Gerwein before returning to your guests."

Dribeck grunted sourly and massaged the back of his neck. Attendants were prowling about the chamber now, sorting through the debris to find fresh clothing for their master. Pentri cursed sleepily and burrowed beneath the furs. Giving her an envious look, Dribeck yielded himself to his servants' ministrations. - There were better cures for a hangover than to plunge into the tangled subtleties of Selonari statecraft,, he- reflected.

"Any word as to Gerwein's present mood or thoughts?" he inquired of his chamberlain.

Asbraln spread his fingers. "She's angry--angry and suspicious. But that's not a new story. Our high priestess, is unhappy with the increasing rumors that you intend to remove the tax exemptions the Temple of Shenan has enjoyed these many years. And this latest gathering of military power she interprets as a display 'of strength--an indication that you mean to enforce your taxation of Shenan's virgin coffers. I think she envisions a wholesale looting of the Temple wealth... and it's certain that she has unobtrusively increased the Temple guard."

"A lot of good that will be to her, if she thinks to stand against my will in this! But she must give some credence to my insistence that we strengthen our armed might against Breimen. The peace has been a tottering sham for years now, and it's common knowledge Malchion has doubled his mercenary ranks since last year."

"Gerwein is aware of this, milord. But she sees this as a threat to the Temple as well. She reasons that the expenses of another war with Breimen would only sharpen your eagerness to plunder the Temple's riches."

"Strikes me there's some contradictions in her suspicions," Dribeck mused. "Well, I'll talk with her, try placate her. I'm meeting her in the Temple, which she'll take as some concession to her prestige. And while I'm reassuring her, I can begin to plant a few thoughts in her mind on the consequences of Malchion's aggression. Her Temple would suffer more than sectarian indignities if the priests of Ommem held sway Selonari. I think her balking at taxation will be less strident once she begins to think upon this as a holy war.

"So I'll calm icy Gerwein's objections somehow--at least until the next fancied insult provokes her. Then back to my guests...I'm leaving the day's entertainment to your overseeing. I intend to take leave of Gerwein in time to join in the games this afternoon. I've been accused of scholarship too often to risk any suggestion that the martial arts aren't the center of my life and interests. Anything else of pressing significance that I need to know about today?"

Asbraln paused a moment before suggesting, "Milord, there's a man who requests audience with you--a stranger named Kane. He claims to have a matter of considerable urgency and importance which he wishes to discuss with you."

Dribeck carefully readjusted the ties of his shirt. "Discuss with me? I assume you judged his case not to be altogether a waste of my time. Obviously, he must have enough confidence in his ability to claim my, attention to warrant his passing bribes all the way up channels to my chamberlain. Well, what kind of man do you make him, and what's on his mind?"

With an air of wounded dignity Asbraln explained, "He's a strange man... savage-looking giant of a warrior, but a man of obvious breeding and refinement. Couldn't guess at his origins; he says he's from beyond the Southern Lands. I doubt he's from Wollendan, although his red hair and blue eyes remind you

of that people. Age I'd guess around forty. Gives the, impression of being extremely capable--and dangerous. I'd call him a mercenary officer--one several cuts above the average--who's seeking employment. At least, all he would tell me regarding his business with you was that he wishes to show you the means to increase your armed might beyond your wildest ambitions."

"Intriguing;" Dribeck pronounced. "He comes at a fortuitous moment if his boast is true. More likely he's either crackpot or swindler--or perhaps an assassin sent by Malchion... or Gerwein? Disregarding these possibilities, I can take a few minutes to listen to him. From what you say, his sword might be worth my purchase, unless he sets too high a value on his service. Have this Kane brought to me at the games; I'll not need to grant formal audience to such a man as this. And see that he's closely watched while in my presence. If he's an assassin, he'll know his task is suicidal."

With uncertain stomach Dribeck steeled' himself to attempt the breakfast his attendants were expectantly setting.

IV

A Stranger Brings Gifts

Arrows thudded a staccato rhythm into the wooden targets. Like a dull reverberation followed the shouts of spectator and archer together, a riotous clamor of cheers, curses, catcalls, advice. The mood was jovial, and the sour scent of beer made heady the cool air of Selonari's martial field. Already the games had progressed to the point where betting was fiercely earnest when Lord Dribeck returned from the Temple of Shenan.

His session with the high priestess had gone a little easier than expected, although Dribeck knew better than to hope Gerwein had abandoned either suspicion or ambition. Still, every day their confrontation could be delayed was a step toward victory for Dribeck and his party. Feeling more at ease, he greeted his guests with casual roughness suited to the situation and tossed off a foamy mug of beer, shouting for more to soothe a throat made arid from his tedious meeting with Gerwein. His stomach squirmed in protest before subsiding, for Dribeck loathed the taste of beer. But the alcohol seemed to blot over his lingering hangover, and he began to take in the celebrative spirit of the afternoon. Followed by a few of his closest supporters, Dribeck mingled with his guests, exchanging loud greetings and reckless wagers. He was becoming interested himself in the archery match when Asbraln approached to remind him of his half-forgotten appointment.

At Asbraln's introduction Dribeck turned a politely quizzical face toward the stranger while his mind

considered the man speculatively. He was a formidable figure, this Kane, with a hulking, powerful stature that belied the feral grace of his movements. His rather brutal countenance managed to project a high degree of intellect to an eye discerning enough to penetrate its harsh savagery. The eyes... there was something chilling in their glint, a certain reflection of cold-blooded ruthlessness that underscored the impressions Dribeck had sensed. Kane was a hard-bitten warrior who had cut his way through many a battle and hardship, and his bearing indicated that he had led more often than followed. Whatever land he had last fought in, he had departed not without wealth: his garments of red wool and black leather adorned with silver studs, though not new, were not the garb of a common mercenary; nor was the sword whose hilt--unmistakably Carsultyal workmanship--protruded above his right shoulder a blade of usual quality.

On impulse, Dribeck extended his hand. The wrist his fingers closed upon was thick with sinew and muscle, while his own wrist was enshrouded in a long fingered grip of measured strength. He wondered unpleasantly with what force might that grip tighten in anger as he retrieved his hand and gestured toward a servant to bring beer to the newcomer.

"Kane arrives bearing gifts," broke in Asbraln obliquely. He weighed the cracked leather volume apprehensively, wondering if its discolored binding might disguise some inconceivable assassinaton scheme. "This book," he explained lamely, as he offered it to his lord. Absently he brushed his hands across his stocky thighs, leaving faint grayish smudges trailing along the yellow wool.

Conscious of Kane's scrutiny, Dribeck opened the volume and concentrated over the unfamiliar characters. His thin face broke into a smile of enthusiastic appreciation. "Look, Asbraln! It's Laharbyn's Principles of Sovereignty--and in the original Carsultyal! An early transcription, by the writing!"

"I had thought you might find Laharbyn's work of interest," commented Kane smoothly. "Your interest in the finer arts is well known, so I presumed that a book might please you by way of introduction. Particularly since these works from Carsultyal's days of glory seldom reach this far west. Laharbyn has some intriguing observations on the consolidation of state power... You read Carsultyal, I see."

"Haltingly," Lord Dribeck acknowledged. "I've taken instruction in the six great languages. I'm grateful, Kane--this is an unanticipated treasure! Laharbyn I know chiefly through Ak-Commen's plagiarized On Rule. This will make a useful addition to my library."

Aware that he was in the midst of the games, Dribeck collected himself and instructed Asbraln to see that the book was placed in his chambers. His guests would not look favorably upon any show of dilettantism in this setting. Signing for Kane to accompany him, he resumed his jostled circuit along the field, his thoughts on the stranger. This was an odd gift to come from a man of Kane's profession. Possibly Kane was merely an individual of rare discernment and taste--not all wandering mercenaries were unlettered barbarians. But in view of his own political position in Selonari, Dribeck considered Kane's gift of the classic treatise on Realpolitik to imply broader meaning. The afternoon. was proving more interesting than he had imagined.

"You intrigue me, Kane," Dribeck admitted. In step beside him the stranger nodded with a bland smile. "You've obviously taken some pains to achieve this meeting, and I wonder why. Any of my officers would have paid well for your sword, though I doubt your ambitions are that straightforward. Asbraln tells me you hinted of some means to strengthen my army..."

"Your astuteness has not been exaggerated," Kane remarked. He spoke the aboriginal language of the Southern Lands without a trace of accent, although the precise, almost pedantic, phrasing suggested it was not his native speech. "May I reflect your interest by stating that Selonari and its ruler intrigue me. As

you've observed, I live by my sword--and by my wits. At present, I'm on my own and close to having exhausted the gains of my last venture, although in the past I've fought under the banners of the greatest lords--and under my own a time or two, as well.

"I set a high price on my services, a value judged from many years and many campaigns--experience that wins battles in the field and in the palace. It's a game that I love, and I choose carefully to whom I offer my sword. In brief, I seek out those battles where the adventure races to overshadow the rewards. Adventure to ease my boredom, reward to soothe my ambition... to the lord who can satisfy these motivations, I pledge my sword and the wisdom of countless battles that tempers its edge. And I feel certain that I converse with such a lord.

"It's well known in the circles I travel that Lord Dribeck of Selonari desires to add fighting men to his army, ostensibly to guard against invasion across the northern frontier by Breimen. A reasonable enough motive, since Lord Malchion of Breimen also is paying well for mercenary swords, and it's no secret that the men of Wollendan desire to extend their power all across the Southern Lands and into the Cold Forests. Then again, men say, that Selonari must first conquer Breimen, before you can look toward Breimen. Selonari's ruler is young--he ascended his brother's throne before he reached maturity. And under the regency that followed his brother's untimely death, the shaky foundations of central power in the city-state crumbled yet further. Selonari's nobility are strong, and the Temple of Shenan longs to reassert itself as the center of authority. Or so men speculate in taverns and barracks all across the Southern Lands.

"All in all, men say Lord Dribeck's position is desperate, if not untenable--particularly since rumor hints he means to establish himself as absolute power in Selonari, despite the contrary wishes of certain powerful houses and of the Temple of Shenan."

"If you consider my position untenable, why have you come here?" queried Dribeck, with a note of anger.

"But I don't," Kane rushed to reply. "I only repeat rumors as they must have been reported, to you. I admire a man who would rule by his wits more than by his soldiers. And I like the odds. There's no adventure in fighting for a lord whose victory is all but assured beforehand--and no profit. The lord whose hold on power is precarious... he pays well for the strength he needs to swing the balance to his favor. And will you dispute this logic which led me to Selonari?"

"I won't deny the truth of much you've observed," said Dribeck, after he had walked awhile in thought. "But it seems you set a very high value on your services, Kane. Your name is unknown to me; you come without credentials other than a bold front and a polished tongue. And I'm still in the dark both as to what you propose to accomplish and what its cost will be."

Kane's reply was interrupted as Dribeck halted to watch the archers. The match was nearing conclusion. The targets--life-sized human outlines painted on planks--were moved back to well over a hundred yards' distance, and only a few of the many challengers remained in the contest. Scoring was based on a traditional set of values assigned various anatomical areas, higher points designated to the more vital regions, highest being the heart and eyes. There being no entrance restrictions, a great number of archers had begun the match--most participating only for sport and small bets with one another. But after eliminations progressed, only the most skilled marksmen remained to compete for the generous purse, and betting paced the mounting excitement.

"Are you an archer, Kane?" Dribeck asked suddenly.

"I can hold my own," he answered, offhand.

"That's my cousin Crempra there--third from the left, in brown with the high boots." Dribeck pointed toward a slender youth with no apparent familial resemblance. Crempra, who could not be as young as he looked, was stepping away from the mark in disgust. "Cousin just cost me some money with that last arrow. I was playing a long shot that he'd finish in the top five--should have tried for top ten, but Crempra told me he felt lucky. Out of his league, anyway, but the odds were nice. Look, can you handle his bow any better, Kane?"

Kane spoke cautiously, wondering where this was leading. "With a bow that I'm accustomed to, I could stand up against this field. With an unfamiliar one..."

"Crempra's is an excellent weapon," Dribeck pronounced, and waved for his cousin to join them. "You can have some free arrows to get the feel of it. You're unknown here, and there's a fine chance to set up side bets... unless you aren't sure you can--"

"Hell, what's the bet?" Kane inquired, recognizing that backing down was not among the choices.

"That you can match the score of the five finalists--that's on a set of ten arrows at full range. Can't run through the whole series, but against the last set we can find a lot of takers who'll give us odds. Are you game?"

"Why not?" assented Kane as Crempra joined them. While Dribeck explained things to his cousin, Kane examined his bow. It was a fine instrument, he judged, a heavy weapon of moderate length after the style favored across the Southern Lands. Here in the forests its power suited it to hunting or battle, although the bow would be too cumbersome for cavalry use.

Crempra was openly dubious but nonchalant. At Dribeck's urging he and Asbraln mingled with the throng taking bets, while the former gave orders concerning the arrangements. Dribeck seemed enthusiastic--he risked relatively little gold in the wager. If Kane won, the prestige would be Dribeck's as his backer. Should he lose, Kane would be at a disadvantage in striking a bargain with Dribeck.

Satisfied with preparations, Dribeck settled back to watch events unfold, angular jaw raised confidently, beer mug loosely held at waist level. The archery match was at last reaching an end, the final two marksmen loosing their last shafts. A wave of cheers signaled the winner--a Wollendann captain in Ovstal's service--but already word of Dribeck's wager was drawing attention to the new diversion. Various of his acquaintances sauntered away from the crowd that milled about the winners to question Dribeck regarding the stranger.

Judges quickly computed the minimum score needed to fulfill the wager; the match had been well contested, and the top five scores were high. Interest concentrated on Dribeck's proposal as the crowd waited for the other matches to begin.

It was going well. More reckless than he customarily allowed himself to be, Lord Dribeck became caught up in the general spirit. With mysterious allusions, he evaded questions concerning Kane and somehow created the simultaneous impression that the wager was both a sudden whim and a calculated ploy. It was not a day for sober deliberation. Dribeck was a consummate gambler, this had long been known. Betting grew spirited.

A disregarded thought told him that more money was riding on Kane's untested ability than he had intended, that he had somehow implied far more knowledge of the stranger than he had any claim to. This

awareness was now beside the point. Still, a shadow of unease whispered to Dribeck as he watched Kane's trial shots. The stranger had removed his sword to give full freedom to his movements. His stance was firm; Crempra's bow bent easily enough under the pull of his brawny shoulders. But his arrows were widely spaced, striking the target haphazardly, half flying wide or falling short.

Dribeck optimistically told himself that Kane was settling on a point of aim, familiarizing himself with the bow. Then the judges announced that the series would begin, and Kane chose ten arrows. Bets hastily concluded as the men concentrated on the archer and his distant target.

Kane's first arrow struck the center of the silhouette's chest. The next two feathered the heart. A fourth protruded from the throat. Two more shafts bit into each eye. Another squarely between. Then again to the heart. Before the tenth arrow was released, the only dispute that remained was whether the arrow to the crotch had been intentional or not. Kane's tally was almost twice that of the high score for the set.

A raucous outburst followed his last arrow. Outrageous handfuls of coins glittered and jingled from reluctant purse to eager hand. Awestricken applause mingled with clamors of protest, while older spectators argued over legendary contests that reputedly had attracted archers of greater skill.

"This really is a fine bow," Kane remarked, returning it to Crempra. "Should you decide to sell it, I'd be interested in talking with you." Crempra accepted the weapon with a bitter smile; he had bet against Kane.

"Brilliant marksmanship!" Dribeck congratulated, watching from the corner of his eye as Asbraln swept together a mounting heap of coins. "I was wondering how this might end after seeing your warm-up."

"No point in scaring off bets," Kane explained, which was not entirely true.

The uproar gradually dissipated as the games progressed to new events. Targets were rearranged for spear and knife competitions; elsewhere preparations began for bare-handed combat. Other fights took place which had not been planned, but none of them reached the stage of serious injury. It was a splendid afternoon, and Dribeck felt unaccustomed exhilaration as he downed another mug of beer. He was going to be drunk on his ass by nightfall, but he would not be alone, and it was a glorious afternoon.

"Well, Kane, if you have other talents that sparkle like your aim, I'll pay well to enlist them," Dribeck exclaimed between toasts. "Just what do you have in mind? Obviously a position of leadership. Granted. Shall I give you command over a company? Readily done--new mercenary troops are coming into Selonari every day, and I need experienced officers. There'll be a good chance to move to higher rank if you prove to be up to your own recommendation. I look for ability in my staff, and you'll find me as quick to recognize it as to reward it."

"Your offer is generous enough," Kane said smoothly, his manner implying his acceptance would be a personal favor. "But as I have hinted, I hope to discuss something more than military commissions--matters of far greater portent to your rule."

"Oh?" Dribeck had recognized that Kane's interest was more complex than simple pursuit of office. "Back to the mystery plan to make my army irresistible in battle? I had assumed you were grandstanding with Asbraln."

"This doesn't need to reach the public ear." Kane gestured toward the entourage.

Dribeck had already discarded the idea that Kane might be an assassin. He signed to his guard, who

drew back. Withdrawing somewhat from the elbowing crowd, he propped himself against an overturned beer keg and looked inquiringly at the stranger.

"I'm a man of considerable learning," Kane began.

"So you've taken great pains to impress upon me."

"It was my intention to establish the validity of what I'll propose to you," Kane explained with a slight frown. "You're intelligent... a scholar of note. I'd only be wasting my, time unless I've convinced you that my ideas are founded on careful study--on learning, rather than on ignorant superstitions."

Now completely baked as to Kane's intent, Dribeck shrugged. "All right, I'll grant that you're well informed. But come to the point."

"I've spent a great deal of time in Carsulyal," Kane went on. "Her days of glory are long past, it's true, but that land was the center of man's exploration of elder knowledge. Most of the 'discoveries' that mankind built a civilization upon after the fall of the Golden Age were actually rediscoveries of alien science, pickings gleaned from the scrapheaps of vanished prehuman civilizations."

"Truth that has already all but passed from the popular mind," Dribeck nodded. "Man knows that he sprang forth on the Earth full grown, but in his conceit he has forgotten the reasons for his short infancy. Yes, I know the great works of Carsulyal. I've read of the fantastic discoveries of those early men--the giants who fathomed the secrets of elder Earth to build a civilization overnight upon the prehuman ruins. I even have two volumes of Kethrid in my library, including the launching of Yhosal-Monyr and his voyages to explore the ancient Earth. It's a tragedy that the entire tale of that first great exploration is unknown to history."

"Tragedy? But then Kethrid lived for the poetry of the mysterious," mused Kane.

Withdrawing his thoughts from another path, he continued. "Good! Then you're familiar with much that I'm going to disclose to you. Do you know Alorri-Zrokros's Book of the Elders?"

"I know of it," Dribeck acknowledged, "though I've never seen a copy--nor spoken with one who has. Alorri-Zrokros's grand design of compiling a history of prehuman Earth was a brilliant conception. The zeal with which he pursued his researches bore unhallowed results, as his contemporaries record. Following that, little effort was made to preserve his work for those who might follow him."

"I've read Alorri-Zrokros," Kane stated. "I know his book well, and I respect the ancient wisdom he unveils in those pages. Knowledge is a tool--black knowledge a dangerous tool, but nonetheless a source of power; to him who uses it with care."

Kane paused, seemingly in thought. Dribeck stared at him, awe-stricken interest in his gaze. A dozen wild speculations tumbled through his brain. He did not doubt Kane's assertion. Somehow no wonder seemed beyond the stranger's power to unfold.

"I read in the Book of the Elders of an elder race called the Krelran," Kane continued, "and of their ruined city which is known to man as Arellarti."

And suddenly Dribeck felt that the afternoon had been drained of its warmth and familiar laughter. There was no physical change. Just that a subtle and smothering veil seemed to separate them from the sunlight, from the human carousal, from the buoyant well-being he had known a moment ago. Annoyed at his

sudden chill, he tried without success to dismiss it with a mental shrug. Unaccountably, Dribeck noticed for the first time the bizarre ring Kane wore loosely on his left hand--a bloodstone massive even against that outsize fist.

"What did the wizard have to say of Arellarti?" asked Dribeck uneasily.

"Much that would interest you--considering Selonari's proximity to the ruins. The Krelran were an enigma even among the mysterious elder races of prehuman Earth. Alorri-Zrokros has very little to disclose of their origins, their civilization, their position in the dawn world. They were not native to Earth--like others of that time, they came from beyond the stars--where, how, why is not known. The Krelran were few in number; so far as man has discovered, they built only one city, Arellarti. The ancient seas cut deep into the Southern Lands then, and Arellarti stood upon an island of a great inland bay. Alorri-Zrokros describes it as a wondrous and imposing citadel, standing only for a short time before its fall.

"For the Krelran found the ancient Earth a hostile world. Even in their solitude they became embroiled in the wars of the elder races. They defended their city well with their strange weapons; the alien science that had carried them from beyond the stars harnessed for them energies beyond human imagination. Great as their strength must have been, their enemies were more powerful. Arellarti was destroyed within its first century--by the Scylredi, Alorri-Zrokros postulates. The Krelran never recovered; their few survivors lived as savages in the shelter of the forested shore. The ancient sea receded until Arellarti was a lost island in a vast salt marsh, called today Kranor-Rill. Still skulking within the swamp and its vine-hidden ruins are the degenerate remnants of the Krelran race... the bestial anthropoid slime-dwellers you call Rillyti."

Dribeck rocked back on the beer keg, rubbing his palms across his knees. "Not all of what you tell me is new to us in Selonari," he pointed out. "The borders of Kranor-Rill are only a long day's ride from our walls, on the southern edge of our holdings. Though my people are not versed in the legends of the elder races, we know the Rillyti. Savage monsters--stand taller than a man, but their bodies are amphibian--heads like toads. They're semi-intelligent--fight with forged weapons, have a language of sorts. Dangerous beasts--but fortunately it's rare for one to stray from the confines of their swamp. And Kranor-Rill they're welcome to! As treacherous a tangle of slime and mud, vines and cypress, insects and vermin as ever defiled good land. The swamp is virtually impenetrable, and not far from its southern limits the Cold Forests begin. So there's not even a good reason for traveling around Kranor-Rill.

"As to Arellarti, our legends tell various stories of a lost city that lies in ruins within Kranor-Rill. And it's told that the city was built long ago by the Rillyti, that they still use its fallen structures as a temple for their obscene rituals. They do creep forth on occasion and steal a girl from one of the outlying farms. Few men have braved the swamp and its ugly guardians to seek out Kranor-Rill's lost city; fewer still have returned to describe their adventure. Some men claim to have glimpsed Arellarti; their tales range from its being a shining city of gold to nothing more than a vine-choked jumble of broken stone.

"So Kranor-Rill is a stinking quicksand pesthole that wise men avoid. The Rillyti are dangerous but rarely seen, since they shun the dry forestlands. Not even worth exterminating--if that were feasible. Wolves, panthers... these are the real dangers to those who live beyond the walls.

"Well, your account of Arellarti's forgotten past is intriguing, Kane. Perhaps, then, there's substance to the sinister and unsettling legends of Kranor-Rill. At any rate, you give a certain aura of ancient grandeur to that ill-famed region and its repulsive inhabitants. But just what significance do you attach to this? What bearing does prehuman history have on my present state of affairs?"

Kane inspected his empty mug and answered in a lowered voice, "Perhaps a great deal. We know that Arellarti was the fortress of an advanced civilization. The weapons of the Krelran were deadly beyond human conception. Now, suppose you had access to such power... imagine that Krelran weaponry were available to your army!"

"Absurd!" Dribeck commented, though his face showed interest. "Whatever weapons the Krelran commanded are age-old heaps of corrosion and dust by now."

"I'm not so certain," Kane went on. "Alorri-Zrokros hints that much of Krelran science lies preserved in Arellarti's ruins--that their most potent weapon was spared in the city's fall! The elder races controlled secrets of unfathomable mysteries, of incalculable powers! Is it so impossible, therefore, that some of their creations might have resisted the breath of time--might there not still exist some few artifacts of Krelran science that only await the touch of intelligence to be reactivated? I tell you, Lord Dribeck, I have spent years studying the great works of Carsultyal, and of other learned minds! I'm not only convinced that certain Krelran weapons survive in Arellarti, but I'm certain I can discover the secrets of their operation!"

"The odds are formidable on either assertion," reflected Dribeck, now plainly intrigued by Kane's argument.

"But the stakes are more than high enough to justify the attempt. If I can uncover just a few of their weapons... if I can reactivate only some minor portion of their ancient power... think of the value this would be to your army. The prestige, the fear of an unknown power! It would assure your leadership of Selonari--and Malchion would think long before risking his troops against such a force!"

"Arellarti is well guarded against intrusion these days," Dribeck pointed out, his thoughts racing in excitement. A calm voice of logic was speaking unheeded within his mind.

"It would be difficult--a dangerous mission, I'll concede. What I propose to do is lead a small force of picked men--well armed to combat both swamp and Rillyti--lead them into Kranor-Rill. Alorri-Zrokros mentions that a path of sorts does exist. I've led a force through 'impenetrable' swamp before, and there I battled slinking natives with poisoned darts and treacherous snares. Logistically, this problem is similar and can be met with appropriate military solution. We'll enter Arellarti, and we'll unearth the secrets its ruins hold. What I find, I'll carry back to Selonari. And you'll have the weapons of elder Earth at your command."

"And what will you have, Kane?"

The stranger laughed. "Adventure... that for certain! And I trust your gratitude and confidence in me will lead you to reward me with a position of high rank. I'm not going to stay young forever... I hope that my years of fighting another's wars might leave me with more than a notched sword."

There was a note of mockery to his laughter, but Dribeck was well aware that he dealt with an ambitious man. "I'll give it a lot of thought," he promised. "Obviously, there'll be countless problems in organizing and carrying out your expedition--which I'm still doubtful that I'll back." But he and Kane both knew the proposal had captured his imagination. It was a long shot--hopelessly so, perhaps--but long shots paid a very high return for a paltry risk. Arms and equipment were mostly the property of the mercenaries... and it cost nothing for a mercenary to die.

With a thoughtful grunt Dribeck slid from the keg to rejoin the riotous throng. But the spirit of carefree buoyancy did not return to him.

The Rotting Land

Far south of Selonari, the forest confidently swept on. A blue-green sea of giant trees, flecked with ever broadening patches of white as it halted against the rocky coast--the Cold Forests, where paths that led to the Ice Sea had seldom felt the tread of man. The forest's advance was not unbroken. Just to the south of Selonari grew a cancer. A festering abscess blighted the Southern Lands for tens of miles, swallowed the clear mountain rivers that fed its sickness, drained as a fistula through a wound in the Lesser Ocalidad Mountains and into the Western Sea. A rotting land. Kranor-Rill.

At Kranor-Rill the forest faltered. The proud, straight trunks gave way to stunted weaklings as the land began to sink. With an almost perceptible break, the forest ceased, the swamp began. Cypress was now the largest tree, its tortured roots gasping through the tepid slime, where even willow and sycamore drowned. Perhaps the soil still bore its taint of ancient salt sea, for even the fertile mulch of decay seemed unable to support verdure normally encountered in swampland. There was a poisoned maze of twisted trunks, of thorn-guarded scrub, of writhing vines. The vines--these were best suited to Kranor-Rill, thin creepers like drawn copper wire that tore with barbed kiss at those who brushed against them. Gargantuan lianas entwined about the trees--eventually amassing so thick as to choke their hosts--forming grotesque tangles of free-standing coils as their victims rotted in their grasp. Cowering, choking, poisonous, parasitic creatures--the vines were the spirit of Kranor-Rill.

It was a cold swamp, but not with the clean chill of the Cold Forests on which it bordered. The unwholesome warmth of an ocean of decay rotted the crisp cold to a corpse-like chill, like the buried incalescence of some deep and teeming crypt. From this rose a thick and ever present mist, a cloak of smothering vapor that clung to the morass, swallowed its chaotic vegetation, masked its unfathomed quicksand bogs. Kranor-Rill was a poisoned labyrinth whose oozing breath obscured the deadly hazards of its maze.

A golden-eyed serpent with scales like yellow mud broke through the green-scum crust of a dark pool and seized a man who passed too near its edge. Its wedge-like head gaped awesome jaws in a flash of hungry white as it struck, sinking double-tiered fangs into the soldier's thigh. Thrown to the mud by the impact, he had only time for a frightened howl of pain before the serpent embraced him in coils thicker than his heaving chest. Too late the mercenary sought his sword--his arm was pinioned tight against his side. Somehow his free hand found a dirk. That hand stabbed convulsively, hopelessly, at the crushing coils that drew him irresistibly into the pool. Dark water stifled shriek of dread, muffled crack of

splintering bone, cloaked glint of yellow coils. The crust of green scum drew a final, ruffled curtain to the scene.

It had lasted but a few seconds. The victim's startled companions broke from their frozen horror and rushed too late to the pool's edge. Across its fetid surface, scum boiled frantically, testimony to the death struggle writhing below. The enraged mercenaries jabbed swords and spears into the pool in useless retaliation, sinking to their knees in slime. A few thrusts seemed to strike resistance and brought eager curses, but the black water held its secret well. As the churning subsided, threads of dark crimson were seen tracing a pattern against the green scum. Whose blood diluted the swamp muck was never known--serpent and prey had vanished.

Angered at this newest setback, Kane drove his men back from the treacherous pool. Already they had paused to drag two men from unseen patches of quicksand, while a third had been engulfed by the morass before any hand could reach him. Two soldiers lost this quickly from his band! Worse yet, half a day had slipped past while they trudged through the reeking muck, and Kane was uncertain as to the distance that must yet be covered before darkness. Night, in ruined Arellarti would be ordeal enough. But if night overtook them still shuffling through the swamp...

Kane cursed and slapped his arm. The bloodstone ring wriggled on his mud-slick finger and came perilously close to slipping off. It would have been wiser to keep the jewel in a secure pouch, but for reasons of his own, Kane stubbornly displayed the outsize ornament on his hand. A smear of blood on his arm marked the death meal of a swollen mosquito. Similar stigmata adorned like plague spots the exposed flesh of them all. Sourly Kane rubbed swamp slime over his already befouled face and arms, wondering if this provision in any degree slackened the incessant attack of the swarming insects.

"Two down--twenty-three to go," commented Banlid, Kane's paunchy second-in-command. "Kane, this stinking trail is going to lead us somewhere before dark, isn't it? I'm hoping it'll be the far side of this damn swamp!"

"It'll take us to Arellarti, and well before night," Kane growled, exhibiting confidence far in excess of his private feelings. Banlid had accompanied him at Dribeck's suggestion, and it was obvious that the Selonari acted as his lord's representative. It was an expected precaution, one which Kane accepted without resentment. "Regroup the men," he ordered. "This time maybe they'll keep to the trail and show a little more vigilance. The Rillyti can blend into this undergrowth as well concealed as that swamp python, and their strike will be as deadly!"

It was too much to expect that their intrusion could escape the attention of the Rillyti, Kane realized. But the risk was unavoidable, and he could only hope that the swamp creatures would be reluctant to attack so large a group of armed men--although their dim minds might consider this trespass sufficient provocation. Selonari had a few grim tales of skirmishes between man and Rillyti. Even allowing for the license of legend, the accounts were not cause for confidence. And it was only logical that the Rillyti would maintain some watch over the only direct path into their domain.

Doubtless the Rillyti knew numerous other pathways through Kranor-Rill. But Kane had learned of only one trail open to creatures not of amphibian stature and habits--and in places it seemed that even this one was beyond human capacity to follow. Alorri-Zrokros had written of a causeway built by the Krelran to span the inland sea, a bridge between their island citadel and the surrounding mainland. It was an earthen causeway, capped with reddish stone of curious texture. A hint of its construction lay in Alorri-Zrokros's suggestion that the inland sea was not a natural bay, rather an excavation blasted into the Southern Lands by the might of Krelran science. Kane had noted that the region's geology tended to support such a hypothesis.

But the causeway yet stood, outlasting the ages that had seen the ancient sea give way to tangled swampland. Following the vague description given in the Book of the Elders, Kane had discovered the vine-hidden entrance to the roadway at nightfall of the day previous. With dawn he had warily led his detachment of mercenaries into Kranor-Rill. Two men remained with the horses.

The swamp had almost overwhelmed the causeway, eating into its bank, burrowing beneath its bed, lapping across its surface, so that each slime-coated pool had to be probed to determine its depth. Often a seeming puddle proved to be a deep hole or bottomless quicksand. Such had to be carefully skirted, and twice logs were laid to bridge a gap where the swamp had rotted a full swath of roadway. Only in a few places could the original paving stones be trod upon. Long stretches of pavement lay buried under the thick mold of decay, and elsewhere thrusting trees and tenacious vines had erupted through the stones to form impenetrable masses of masonry and vegetation. Wherever their roots could cling grew knife-edged swamp grass and rubbery reeds high as a man's waist; and the space above was interlaced with tough lianas that dulled the intruders' swords and clawed back with grasping thorns. The boundary between swampland and causeway became a point that often defied conjecture, and only the adherence to straight-line design by the centuries-dead Krelran engineers made the decision one of reasonable certainty.

Progress was hideously slow, and the pitiless harassment of swarming insects and leeches made the march a torture. But Kane had chosen his men well, and though vitriolic, their curses did not become mutinous, even when another of their number met with mishap. He thrust his hand through the web of, a gorgeous brown-and-yellow spider, whose bite left his sword arm swollen in scarlet agony.

At length the victim of the spider's fangs cried out incoherently and dropped to his knees. Delirious from the venom, he struck out at his solicitous companions, cradling his swollen arm and moaning in pain. With an eye toward the declining sun, Kane hurried to the man's side. An effort had already been made to draw out the venom--evidently without striking success--and Kane professionally estimated the soldier's chances as barely worth the effort of carrying him. The spider was of a species unknown to him, but evidently it shared the deadly antipathy that was Kranor-Rill's soul. Deeming it improvident to appear callous to his men, Kane ordered a short rest, privately wishing the victim might expire before it became necessary to transport him.

The pause was well timed.

One of the men who had moved somewhat ahead gave a sudden yell. "Damn! Here's one of them ugly things now! Hiding inside that mess of vines!" With a howl he retreated as a spear streaked past his chest.

Rising from the swamp itself, a band of Rillyti menaced them from the trail ahead--more than a dozen of the batrachian creatures. Over a head taller than a man they stood, with squat body far broader than any human trunk. Long spindly arms and thick bandy legs ended alike in splayed, webbed appendages--black claws arming the lengthy phalanges. A mottled hide of wart and scale, hued an unwholesome yellow, brown and green after the swamp slime, covered their hairless bodies. Gnarled plates like armor spread across bowed back and barrel chest, stretched a sickly yellow over gross belly. A toad's head rose from wide shoulders, wattles and throat pouch, obscuring whatever neck supported it. They had lidless slit-pupiled eyes, gaping nostril pits, outsize lipless jaws rimmed with yellow vomerine fangs. These were grotesque, hideous creatures whose powerful, twisted forms echoed the malignant deadliness of Kranor-Rill. As they rose from hiding, black swamp water and gobbets of scum dripped from their hide and rubbery neck crests and glistened evilly on the long blades of bronze alloy that gleamed from webbed hands.

The Rillyti held their position, amphibian faces twisted in a fierce mask, yellow eyes clouded by a flashing nictitating membrane. A low grating rumble issued through bared fangs as their throat pouches puffed and slackened fitfully. Some carried short stabbing spears, to whose serrated tips a vomit-brown tarry substance clung. All were armed with the strange Rillyti sword--a finely curved blade as long as a two-handed broadsword, forged of tough bronze alloy that held a keener edge than steel--a lost alloy scavenged from the Krelran ruins, Kane recalled, and a deadly weapon in their huge hands. The gummy matter adhering to their spears was a rapidly lethal poison of their preparation--corrosive, or it would be smeared on swordblades as well.

Kane considered it most fortunate that the batrachians had no more effective projectiles to dab with this venom--their webbed hands were too large and clumsy to be skillful with a bow, nor were their bony jaws suited to use of the blowgun. However, the dense, almost impenetrable snarl of undergrowth made hand-to-hand combat the only feasible means of attack. Even now the soldiers could not use their bows effectively--too much cover for the enemy, too many tangled vines and branches for undeflected aim.

"They're not moving--looks like they're maybe interested in just guarding the trail" Banlid urged at Kane's side. "Let's get out of here before they rush us!"

"They're blocking the road because it leads to Arellarti. We must be close to!" growled Kane in excitement. "They're guarding just what I've come to find, and I'll gut any bastard who turns back on me now! We can take these slime-blooded toads easy enough! They're putting on a bluff, or they'd have attacked despite their aborted ambush! Turn tail now, and they'll run us down with ten times their number as night catches us on the trail!"

"Come on, you swamp rats!" he roared, swinging his sword in a short flourish. "I'll show you how to gig toads!"

Kane rushed forward and almost was split in half by the first Rillyti to meet him. The instantaneous lunge of its thick legs launched the creature straight against Kane's charge, golden blade swinging downward as it bounded over the mud in a twelve-foot arc. Twisting desperately on the slippery footing, Kane evaded the impetus of its attack by a hairbreadth, and his blade of Carsultyal steel shivered against the bronze. The sword shrieked with a shock that numbed his shoulder, echoed through clenched teeth, but the power of his arm turned aside the onrushing blade. The Rillyti staggered as its lunge was checked, and before it could recover, Kane's weapon caught it across fist-sized eyes, topping the crested skull. With hoarse shouts his men leaped past the convulsing corpse.

"Their blood's red enough! Come on!" yelled Kane, a wild peal of laughter rising in his throat. And the swamp-strangled causeway writhed in chaotic, inhuman battle.

Evading the flailing death agony of the Rillyti, Kane turned to meet a second attack. A leaf-tipped spear jabbed for his belly, as the bufanoid feinted with its sword. Kane twisted away with feral grace, guarding the creature's blade with his own, and snatched at the spearshaft with his right hand. He meant to tear the weapon from his opponent's grip, but to Kane's dismay this stratagem had been foreseen. The shaft was coated with grease, and as the Rillyti jerked back, Kane's hand slid toward the poison-smeared head, missing contact with the serrated edge by the barest margin, when Kane hastily flicked his fingers free.

Determinedly the batrachian thrust again with its spear, this time following through with its blade. Kane parried grimly and without breaking the flow of his attack dropped in a crouch to elude the spear. Straightening with a snap, his right arm uncoiled with the precision of a cracking whip, and the dagger that he had drawn from his boot sank beyond the hilt in a slit-pupiled eye. Croaking in pain, the Rillyti dropped its spear to tear the needle from its eyesocket in a spray of ichor, its convulsive gesture ripping a jagged wound through the orbit. His adversary mortally wounded, Kane relaxed a fraction and nearly joined the swamp creature in, hell. Toppling onto the mud, the Rillyti lashed out its sword with the last controlled effort of its dimming brain, and the swordtip sheared through the top of Kane's boot as he hurriedly danced aside.

The batrachians were as slow to die as their primeval ancestors, and Kane saw at least one soldier spitted on the blade of a Rillyti as it tripped over its own dangling entrails. It was an ugly, vicious battle, as violent and deadly as the rotting land that surrounded the combatants. There was no open ground to speak of--only patches of clearing in a tangle of vines and undergrowth, ground made treacherous with leaning paving blocks, pools of muck and scum-hooded water. More than one mercenary ended his life forced into a slimy pool or quicksand mire. The Rillyti were stronger than their human opponents and fought on terrain familiar to them. But the swamp-dwellers were clumsy in their shambling movements, their webbed splay feet and bowlegs not equal to the deft footwork required for careful swordplay. Nonetheless, the slippery mud and chaotic swamp growth made footing unpredictable, which in large part offset the human beings' advantage in agility, while the Rillyti's hurtling rushes were a razor-edged terror, once the creatures had room to move. Only the raiders' superior numbers were keeping them in the battle.

Feeling a sticky warmth in his boot that he knew was not brackish water, Kane met the attack of another Rillyti. Again and again gray steel clashed against alien bronze, blades screeching like a woman's scream of ecstasy. The long dead Carsultyal swordsmith had forged the temper well, for Kane's sword traded notches with the Krelran alloy, while several other steel blades snapped under the amphibians' powerful strokes. Kane had drawn a long-bladed knife from his belt, which he wielded with his right fist, although his new adversary fought with no weapon other than his sword.

But the Rillyti had other unexpected tactics, as he quickly discovered. As Kane lunged close to use the knife, the swamp creature gaped its jaws and lashed out with a sticky tongue of startling length. The maneuver sprayed Kane's face with a clinging stream of foul saliva. Kane choked and in reflex sought to wipe the acrid spittle from his eyes with his right arm. A second's inattention, and the hissing bronze blade all but struck home--Kane's last-instant parry deflected the other's weapon to block it against the swordhilt. The hilt stood up to the shock, but the force of impact all but wrenched Kane's weapon from his nerveless grasp. The blow benumbed the Rillyti's arm, as well, and Kane thought to finish the creature by quickly stabbing with his knife. The batrachian slithered away from the blade, taking a shallow gash through its tough hide, and its webbed hand struck Kane a solid blow.

Raking talons caught in Kane's mail shirt. On treacherous footing and already off balance, he was spun to the mud. A hanging vine tangled about his sword as he strove in vain to keep his feet, and Kane's numbed fingers relinquished their grip on its hilt. Gasping as his back crashed against an askew paving stone, Kane, swordless, saw the Rillyti raise its blade for a slash his knife could never parry. No chance to scramble for his fallen weapon. But beside him lay... a fallen spear! As he rolled desperately, Kane's left hand closed over the Rillyti spear. The swamp-dweller was upon him, its fanged mouth agape in a bass roar of triumph. The sword was beginning its descent. Twisting on the ground, Kane hurled the spear straight into the yellowed maw. From his semi-prone position it was a desperate, wobbly cast, with little force behind it--but the distance was point-blank, the target lunging toward him...

Three items impinged on his hypersensitive consciousness, moving with dreamlike slowness before his

adrenalin-charged mind... The spear streaking into the Rillyti's mouth, burying its poisoned fang deep into the back of its throat like a second tongue... The gleaming sword descending like a golden rainbow as he made a final effort to writhe from under its path... The bloodstone ring, loose on his finger, sailing away from his hand as he cast the spear, arcing over the embattled swampland...

With infinitesimal slowness these resolved into... A choking Rillyti, its attack forgotten, tearing at the shaft, trying to swallow, writhing a bizarre death dance, crumpling to the mud in agony' becoming still with uncanny suddenness... A bronze sword, deflected in its downward arc, grazing his shoulder as he twisted, exploding into glittering shards as it struck stone... A ring glinting in the late sun, falling through eternity, striking a pool of slime with a thick splash--each droplet seen as it takes form and falls back--sinking into darkness.

With an insane bellow, Kane scrambled to his feet, eyes fixed upon the spot where the bloodstone ring had disappeared. Automatically he scooped up his sword in passing, but no further notice did he take of the battle. At the poolside where the ring had vanished he flung himself down and thrust his arms into the slime. Drawn white, his lips worked in soundless curses; his blue eyes were set in wild concentration. Blood dripped from a deep cut on his cheek--kissed by a fragment of the shattered sword--but he ignored it, even though the taste of blood was drawing a crawling horde of hungry leeches. Determinedly Kane raked his fingers through the fetid swamp muck, pulling up reeking fists full of wriggling mud and scum whenever it seemed he felt something hard. The pool was only a few feet deep here... if only the ring had sunk in a straight path as it hit...

"Kane! Holy shit! Have you gone stark staring mad!" Banlid shouted in his ear, shook his shoulder, interrupted his concentration. "Kane! Damn your ass, Kane! Snap out of it! We're up to our ears in battle!"

Angrily Kane cuffed the soldier away and returned to his searching. Once the rotting land had swallowed the ring, he could never reclaim it.

Alarmed, confused, Banlid jerked away from his leader. His racing thoughts reached a muddled decision that Kane had been struck on the head perhaps...clearly completely mad!

A wounded Rillyti, blood oozing from a deep stab in its chest, broke upon them. If its wound was mortal--as from its position it must be--the creature seemed not greatly disadvantaged. Croaking dismally, it spied the prone human, and its sword swung up. Banlid wasted no further breath on his heedless leader and met the amphibian's attack. Few of the men other than Kane had won out in single combat with a Rillyti--ganging up on the swamp giants being the only effective strategy--and Banlid was close to exhaustion. Still, his antagonist was badly wounded, and as the mercenary feverishly defended himself, he sensed an insidious attenuation of the creature's assault. For all this it was a tight duel--the Rillyti lost all regard for pain or injury as it felt its strength drain from its wounds. In one final furious effort, it beat aside Banlid's tentative counterattack and leaped to grapple with him. Shakily the mercenary sidestepped its lunge, delivered a deep slash to its side, and finally hacked the Rillyti to pieces as it fell on its face, still trying to crawl forward.

Gasping for breath, he looked about for another of the monsters. None rose to attack him. Groggily he contemplated his leader, dull disbelief set in his flushed face. The madman would have let the Rillyti split him in two, had not Banlid interceded.

Kane had crawled out at full length on the pool's edge, his hips balanced there--trunk, shoulders, face buried in the tepid muck. He raised his face for air, expression still distracted; then ducked his head and frantically churned the bottom slime with his hands. Stoically Banlid waited for matters to reach a head.

A sudden splash, and Banlid thought Kane had dived in completely. Rather it was his excited thrashing, as he wriggled back onto the bank. He raised a mad countenance to the other. Slime and mud coated his face and hair, mingled with still flowing blood; a few swollen leeches dangled from the edges of his beard. Insanity burned in his cold blue eyes. His lips were twisted in a smile of triumph.

"All right... I found it," he announced in a low voice that held a harsh undertone. Carefully he wiped the ring on his filthy leathers, then slipped it once more over the middle finger of his left hand. Calmly he brushed his face clean with one hand and retrieved his sword.

Face impassive, he stared at Banlid, as if challenging the other to comment upon his bizarre behavior. "Well, let's see how many are left," he remarked.

Banlid nodded, deciding it was wise to ignore the scene he had just witnessed. Kane seemed his usual self--Shenan knew how sane that might be!--and the stress of battle did evoke strange reactions. The bloodstone ring drew his attention, and he wondered at the gem's eerie, sullen gleam. Was it some trick of the light, or did the stone appear to shed a more vivid luster than before?

VI

When Elder Gods Wake

The ancient causeway was torn apart by the violent struggle that had raged upon the swamp-rotted spine of red stone. Mutilated corpses of men and Rillyti lay strewn in grotesque heaps or floated in the brackish pools. Some of the Rillyti still twitched upon the sodden loam, like giggered frogs left to wither in the late afternoon sun. The bufanoid guardians were slain--reportedly one had fled into the swamp--but the toll of Kane's mercenaries was a grim one. Eight others had survived the attack, all relatively unscathed, for it, had been the kind of battle in which a disabling wound meant swift death. The earlier victim of the spider's fangs lay forgotten where he had fallen, a Rillyti spear standing from his ribs; Kane wondered whether the arachnid's venom had proved fatal before the coup de grâce.

"If we turn back now, maybe we can make the--"

"No one turns back!" Kane interrupted Banlid. "We're almost in sight of Arellarti now, and we'll carry out my original plan! I knew we'd probably have to fight our way through Kranor-Rill--you men were told of our chances when I selected you. Our losses were worse maybe than I'd figured, but we've driven through their guards. I'll see that each of you receives a bonus when we return."

"Kane, we've only killed a few! Shenan knows how many hundreds of these monsters are lurking in this damned swamp!" Banlid protested. "We don't stand a prayer to see another dawn, if we press on deeper!"

"Want to try blundering back through the swamp after nightfall? Then pray the Rillyti overtake you swiftly--they'll grant you a cleaner death than Kranor-Rill has waiting! Sure, we've only seen a few of the Rillyti... they're scattered all through the swampland. But we've likely beaten the only organized force they'll have in our vicinity--those who stood guard over the causeway. It'll take a while for these toads to band together in sufficient strength to overwhelm us, and before then we'll be headed back to Selonari. And at Arellarti there should be room to use our bows. The ruins will give us walls at our backs--a redoubt we can defend with archery should the Rillyti get brave again. And unless the legends lie, we may uncover weapons that will give us the strength to destroy an army!"

Banlid recognized that further remonstrance was futile, probably dangerous. Grimly he acknowledged that Kane's logic was apparently sound, although the red-haired captain offered only the most sketchy plans for escaping from Arellarti, once they reached the place. The expedition held ominous promise of being a one-way trip, and with this unpleasant foreboding Banlid again regretted the role Lord Dribeck had forced him into.

The day grew a mile older, and the ground displayed no inclination to rise. Kranor-Rill yet surrounded them--the swamp seemingly endless, an omnipresence of poisoned life and malignant decay that became relentless rather than monotonous. But the sounds of the swamp had altered. The cacophony of animal sounds persisted, albeit at somewhat muted level, but new sounds now underlay. A bass croaking-distant, but seeming to gather from ever more hidden throats as they progressed. Unseen splashes, startling in their rush, that could only mark passage of creatures of considerable bulk, though no large animals had been sighted for some time. Sounds of dubious portent, where a greater imaginative effort was demanded to supply optimistic interpretation than one bleaker. Despite Kane's confident manner--reckless, a better descriptive--an atmosphere of clinging fear settled over his men.

A far-reaching shadow made twilight of the swampland and alerted them before the close horizon grudgingly yielded view. Already the causeway was rising above the morass, its glassy stones less obliterated now, and the terrain began to drop away as they approached the dull red walls that loomed above the rotting land. An island jutted from the sea of decay, and only their instinctive awe of its alien architecture held them back from storming its yawning portal--as exhausted swimmers strive toward an unknown beach, no thought for what dangers might lie beyond the surf.

Arellarti!

Dwarfed by the paired obelisks from which the massive gates had swung--now the broken pillars were festooned with vine, the gate blasted into blackened and curiously fused fragments of pitted bronze alloy--they paused to marvel at this swamp-guarded city of lost legend. Eagerly Kane clambered up the tangled lianas and gained the wall, nearly breaking his neck as a creeper tore free of the parapet. Heedless of his exposed position, he stood braced against the skyline, hands cupped to shield the setting sun that peered back at him from the opposite wall.

Arellarti was a city of stark and wondrous geometry. Its formulation lay severely circular, with diameter stretching somewhat over three miles to the far wall, so Kane estimated. Walls of the mottled red igneous stone formed a rim a hundred feet high to enclose the city. Cracked and aslant in places, the walls had miraculously escaped the centuries, although one quarter-mile section made a gap, where evidently the swamp had gnawed beneath the island. Beyond the gate, sunken stonework could be dimly glimpsed

extending into the morass, possibly wharves for the long-vanished sea. Within the walls Kane could discern the outline of streets congested with debris and entwining vegetation, a perfect network of radial spokes and concentric circles whose precise engineering called to mind the deadly symmetry of a spider's web. So far as he could distinguish, the flawless geometry was extended even to the buildings that studded the concavo-convex city blocks, although distance and the general condition of extreme disrepair made this uncertain. Nonetheless, there seemed to exist an obsessive insistence that the bizarrely stylized architecture of one edifice be mirrored to the last alien angle by another counterbalancing structure. Briefly Kane noted that certain areas of smashed and toppled buildings appeared to lie in a punched-out pattern of destruction.

But his awareness of further details of the ruins was overawed by his attention to the monolithic structure that totally dominated Arellarti. A grin of triumph bared his teeth, and his bark of laughter caused wonder among his men below. Though an unknown few had ever crossed Kranor-Rill to spy upon these ruins, Alorri-Zrokros's description had been true. There at the center of Arellarti it towered like a vast hub--or like a bloated spider at the intersection of its wide-flung web, thought Kane, recalling his earlier image--colossal domed edifice over a quarter-mile across, whose smooth walls rose above the city to an apex of nearly a thousand feet. The city's seven radial streets converged on an open courtyard that surrounded the dome like a halo, and of an entrance there was no sign, the structure displaying the mathematically pure geometry that characterized all of Arellarti. Unless obscured by vines or effaced by time, any adornment seemed altogether absent from the dome itself, although the other examples of Krelran architecture showed bizarre patterns of geometric design etched into their stonework. Fissures and dark gaps that flawed the dome's soaring walls could be clearly seen at this distance, and the genius of alien engineering must have been marvelous indeed for the cyclopean structure to have resisted the crushing weight of centuries. In common with all else in Arellarti, the dome was constructed of red-mottled stone of evident igneous origin. As the late sunlight caught the city, Arellarti's precise symmetry--its glassy stones of burnt sienna, its measured streets choked with green lianas--suddenly reminded Kane of a brilliant jeweled mosaic.

Grunting chop of sword against vine sounded close at hand. Less reckless than Kane, Banlid and the rest had pushed their way along the wall to the debris-choked stairway that ascended the parapet. Cursing as they methodically hacked through the obstructive maze of creepers, they wearily shuffled over steps which were spaced to a height uncomfortable for human gait. Near the top, their efforts dislodged a nest of hornets, and the stairway disrupted into a mad dance of frenzied swatting and swearing as the gold-and-green insects swarmed over them.

"Shenan's tits, Kane! We should have taken the ape's way up like you did!" complained Banlid, several angry welts puffing through the dirt on his bushy-bearded face. With a breathless cheer of self-congratulation, the men finally gained the rampart. Throwing themselves against the uncrenellated parapet, they gazed upon the ancient city through sweat-blurred eyes.

Abruptly one of the mercenaries wavered uncertainly. "I can't seem to breathe!" he murmured hoarsely, fear spreading across his pale features. His comrades looked at him in amazement, then in alarm, as he slumped to the stones in a stupor, sweaty hands weakly pawing at convulsive throat, his breath a strident wheeze. The sound grew higher pitched, became ragged, then ceased, as his head rolled back and his limbs twitched aimlessly.

"Ommen have mercy--the hornets stung us all! We're all dead men!" moaned a Wollendan mercenary, as panic claimed the watchers.

"No, you're not! Stop your damned yelling before you shake the wall down!" ordered Kane. "Those hornets haven't poisoned the lot of you, or you'd all be flopping off the wall with him! I've seen this

before--some freak of their blood makes a few people react like this to any harmless sting! Now get back and let me see to him--there's an off chance I can save him still!"

Pushing them away, Kane knelt beside the stricken soldier and whipped the dirk from his boot. Swiftly he felt along the spasm-knotted throat below the Adam's apple, sliced through surface tissue, and made a careful incision into the exposed cartilage of the windpipe. "That's putting him out of his misery," commented someone. "Only you missed the big veins."

Kane gestured impatiently. "I cut open his windpipe so he can suck air. See... his chest is trying to pump air, but his throat's clamped shut with poisoned humors. If I was able to bypass the constriction, he can keep breathing until his breath blows off the poisoned humors, and the airways will reopen. I've seen this work a few times when a man was strangling from something within."

His men looked on dubiously, still uncertain that the hornets had not doomed them all. Although comatose, the victim's chest heaved more regularly now, and breath could be heard rushing through the wound in an eerie, bubbling rasp.

Kane watched the object of his handiwork with the inspired interest of experimentation. "Couple of you bring up some of that cane we've been chopping through all day," he ordered. "I think I can get a hollow tube down his windpipe an inch or two maybe. Ought to hold back the constriction and keep the hole open."

Two of the men disappeared down the stairway. The rest remained grouped around the victim, watching with interest. A few bets began to be offered as to his chances.

Howls of death and booming croaks rose like gobbling thunder from below and shattered their absorption with their unconscious fellow. Crawling from the cover of the swamp- a horde of Rillyti erupted onto the causeway. Their number may have been a hundred or a thousand--the computation was pointless in view of the handful who stood against them. Rising from the morass wherein they had stealthily gathered force, they swept onto the high ground like an obscene tidal wave of misshapen flesh and gleaming bronze. Their rush was irresistible. Even as those on the wall turned in horror, the second soldier was shredded under a dozen blades; his companion had utterly disappeared. In an instant the bufanoid army had bounded across the intervening space to storm the walls atop which the interlopers made a hopeless stand.

"We'll try to drive them back!" shouted Kane without conviction. "We've got the obelisk to our backs--that leaves only the one direction they can rush us from! They'll charge the stairway we've cleared for them, or one farther down--either way, that bottlenecks their attack! Bows ready! We'll pick them off as they come up the stairs! Shoot well if you'll live! There's a chance to slaughter enough to discourage their charge!"

And every man there knew that chance to be infinitesimal, and their prospects should they miraculously break the Rillyti onslaught even bleaker. To stain these stones with batrachian gore might make death sweeter, but no less final.

The Rillyti threw themselves at the wall, springing up the partly cleared stairway at as frantic a pace as the congested passage would permit. At close range, the archers fired into the foremost ranks. Roars of pain and rage boomed from the swamp creatures' throats as the powerful shafts skewered vital targets with withering accuracy. With each mortal wound, an amphibian pitched writhing into space and tumbled flailing against those behind. Their agonized contortions dislodged the others and checked their rush until the slain could be thrown over the edge. But the rush could be held only for a moment. Relentlessly the

Rillyti stormed up the stairway, though the slaughter was great, and the steps grew slippery with their blood, the rubble below laden with flopping bodies.

Those who milled at the foot of the stairway shortly grew frustrated at the slow progress and thought to reach their enemy by a shorter route--although it was clear that the attack along the stairs moved inexorably nearer. A few with great hops caught the thick creepers that clung to the wall and began to climb. Others followed their lead, and quickly; the wall was wriggling with a growing horde of clambering Rillyti. Although awkward and heavy, the amphibians used their clawed strength to great advantage--having some occasion to climb in their normal circumstances--and their ascent threatened to overwhelm the defenders in a short time.

Kane immediately noted their new line of assault, and he ordered his two worst archers to ward off this latest threat. With the slackened fire, the charge up the stairway accelerated alarmingly, but Kane knew an attack from more than one point would mean inescapable disaster. And the quivers rapidly grew depleted--only the arrows salvaged from the earlier skirmish had saved their supply from exhaustion before this. With their tough, warty hide and reptilian vitality, the Rillyti were difficult to bring down, often shambling forward in defiance of several well-placed shafts.

Desperately the soldiers hacked at the taut vines, seeking to check the assault on the wall. Often their efforts succeeded, for as the heavy batrachians recklessly flung themselves onto the lianas, the dragging weight became too great a burden. Weakened by the sword blows, one creeper after another tore loose from the wall and plummeted to the earth with its load of luckless climbers. But the lianas were on all sides, and many were too firmly rooted to be dislodged. It soon became necessary to fire down them point-blank, as the climbers struggled to the top. And then their swords had to meet flesh and bronze as the Rillyti reached the rampart.

The Rillyti gained the head of the stairway at about the same moment they broke over the parapet. With the detached calm that comes to fighting men who know death inescapable, Kane and his tiny force sent the last of their arrows drilling into those first to leap onto the rampart. In one corner of his mind, Kane saw the victim of the hornet's sting flung out from the wall, to plunge among the horde yet gathering on the ground below. He felt regret that he would never know whether his surgical efforts had been successful.

The killing that ensued was too one-sided to be termed a struggle. The two who sought to repel the climbers went down immediately, their reddened blades unable to dam the flood that swept over them. Another wave of Rillyti swarmed up the stairway, their rush unimpeded by silent bows.

"Make for the gate pillar!" roared Kane, knowing that they would be instantly overwhelmed by an attack on both sides. Not that the outcome would be altered. "Put the stone to our backs! We'll leave a few less toads to croak tonight!"

Determinedly they rushed toward the Rillyti who were just scrambling over the parapet. Gold blades swept up to bar their path; at their backs the rampart echoed the slapping tread of those who pursued them from the stairs. Kane led his men with a fury no strength could match. One batrachian was blasted from the parapet by the force of Kane's sword; another dropped under the gutting slash of his knife. A scream, and the man beside him reeled with a spear through his side. Kane whirled to lop off the climber's other arm as it reached over the parapet. Trailing scarlet droplets, the creature tumbled away from its hold, its webbed hand left locked about the vine.

Not yet in full possession of the rampart, the Rillyti fell away under their concerted rush. Face twisting in hate, Kane drove through their unformed ranks, dashing past the blades and taloned hands that clutched from the parapet. His desperate strength clove a path through, as none could stand before his blade.

Behind him another of the soldiers died. Blood streamed from two shallow gashes that he never felt strike. And then they reached the gate pillar--Kane, Banlid, and a last mercenary, who slumped against the stone and slid slowly to the walkway as the Rillyti poison stole his last strength.

The timeworn obelisk at their backs, before them the amphibian horde was grouping for the final rush. The wall now crawled with Rillyti, bronze weapons poised to reave, bufanoid faces hideous in yellow-fanged grimaces of rage. Their cold, noisome breath seemed to brush against Kane and Banlid like the icy touch of death.

"We were fools not to turn back!" Banlid groaned. "While we violated their sanctuary, the swamp devils called together their hordes to ensnare us! Kane, we die now as no brave man should ever die!"

"I still have a last throw of the dice!" snarled Kane defiantly.

Taking a deliberate stride toward the advancing Rillyti, Kane dramatically extended his left arm--his hand a clenched fist. The batrachian ranks shuffled a step or two closer... then faltered! Croaking among themselves in subdued tones of confusion, the Rillyti suddenly halted.

Numb in disbelief, Banlid stared with jaw buried in double chin, not daring to guess how long this miracle might last. Initially, the shock was too stunning--some sort of garbled thought suggested that Kane's weaponless defiance had caused their confused hesitation. But a moment passed, and Banlid followed the gaze of those many bufanoid eyes.

He saw the massive bloodstone ring that blazed like a great inhuman eye upon Kane's fist and observed how the darting rays of the sun shone upon the gem, made the bloodstone glow like a living flame. He felt the sudden hush of awe that fell over the vengeful army of swamp creatures and sensed for himself the aura of unthinkable power that pulsed within the ring.

Like a scythe, this incredible reversal of mood passed through those Rillyti gathered about them and stilled their blood-mad roars, the murderous rush upon the wall. As knowledge spread among them, the batrachians fell into uncertain milling, their excited croaking softened under some indefinable emotion... was it dread? The sudden silence that crept over the beleaguered wall was eerie with the dying echoes of battle.

A specter in the macabre tableau, Kane took a slow step forward. A lifetime reached across the completion of that stride! And to Banlid's already overtaxed mind came another miracle beyond belief, transcending all hope. The foremost Rillyti moved back a step!

Another step. Now more of the creatures recoiled. By Shenan... they were retreating!

Deliberately Kane stalked toward them, fist extended so that all could behold the bloodstone ring. Reluctantly, inexorably as the ebbing tide, the Rillyti retreated before him, slunk back along the wall, stole down the stairway. Some broke for the swamp and disappeared into Kranor-Rill carrying news of unimaginable portent to their tribes. The major part of their number drifted back along the streets and into empty doorways, to watch intently from the shadows. It was not truly a retreat, Banlid realized, but something different--an aura of ominous expectancy. Their harsh croaking--surely a rude language--imparted a further sense of waiting... of reverence... of fear... Why?

"I understand now why you scrambled like a madman to regain that ring," whispered Banlid, following uncertainly in Kane's shadow. "Is it some sorcerer's ring of power? What enchantment drives them back?"

Kane's face was transfigured in a storm of emotion. "The ring has no power yet--at least, I don't think so!" His voice was cracked, still shaken with unbearable tension. The nightmarish sequence of events had overstrained even his iron nerve, so that he dropped his normal veiled manner. "The Rillyti know this ring--they recognize Bloodstone! After centuries their race yet remembers the unearthly power this ring can command!"

The Book of the Elders had suggested such racial memory, hinting that worship of Bloodstone yet survived in certain demented rites among the Rillyti. Kane had studied the passage with obsession, brooded countless hours over the secrets hidden within other scraps of legend and black lore, seeking to wrest every particle of ancient knowledge from beyond the veils of time. A vast amount had escaped him, some areas beyond wildest conjecture. Sufficient facts were certain, however-enough to tempt him to fantastic risks. Alorri-Zrokros had maintained that the Rillyti would recognize the ring and honor its bearer; Kane was himself confident that this was indeed the ancient ring. But he had not intended to make the proof of the madman's visions rest on so terrible a test. Kane had fought free of death's grasping claws uncounted times. Still, this headlong plunge into unthinkable disaster, which his forced gamble had checked at the final instant, left him stunned in its aftermath.

Banlid watched the other man calculatingly. His thoughts pieced together numerous items of information regarding Kane--various bits of fact, threads of doubt that had never taken full form, the questions Dribeck had raised concerning the stranger. The Selonari lord has been astute in sending Banlid to keep watch over Kane--Banlid whose rotund frame belied the hardened fighter, as did his sleepy appearance mask a quick mind.

"The bloodstone ring you must have found and recognized as some sort of key to the ancient Krelran mysteries?" he questioned, as they descended the stairway. At Kane's distracted nod, he persisted, "Now that you've reached Arellarti, do you believe you can fathom its lost secrets? Can you command the power this ring may unlock?"

Kane's cold eyes were searching his now. The red-haired stranger was off his guard no longer. His answer came with sardonic tone.

"Yes."

But by this point Banlid had already begun to suspect the essential elements of Kane's designs.

"The Rillyti are overawed for the moment," he suggested. "Let's make a break for it before they lose their enthralment!"

Kane shook his head. "They're not likely to. The power I've fought to possess lies nearby. Before another dawn, I'll explore Arellarti's secrets, or else there'll be no dawn!"

"You'll never succeed in carrying anything of value out of here on your own," Banlid pointed out. "We need to return to Selonari for more men."

Nervously he glanced toward the open gate, the ruined causeway leading across the darkening swampland. "Look, Kane... stay the night here if you're set on daring these devils to tear you to ribbons. But I'm heading back to Selonari right now--and on my own, if you mean to stay. Lord Dribeck will be grateful for whatever discoveries you've made for him. He's sure to send back enough men to help transport any useful artifacts to Selonari. You'll be made a lord, Kane--if the Rillyti don't finish you before dawn!"

"Go if you want to. I'm going to risk it," Kane replied.

Sweat chilled the small of his back as Banlid considered the stranger's ice-fire eyes. "Then I guess I'll try to get through." Could he dare hope Kane had not understood the full reasons for his fear? "If that ring gives you any kind of control over these Rillyti, see if you can persuade them to let me through the swamp." He reminded hopefully, "After all, I saved your life back on the trail when you were grubbing through the muck. I know you won't forget that."

"Hell, Banlid!" Kane muttered impatiently. "Go on and lose yourself in Kranor-Rill--I won't stop you! I don't know how much hold I've got over these toads... or how long it may last. But your chances here with me are better than if you try to follow that causeway after dark!"

"Well, I'll take the chance," returned Banlid. Resolutely he turned and trudged for the gate, trying to forget the numberless terrors that lay between Arellarti and the distant forests. The Rillyti alone presented enough threat, even if--

An envenomed blade drove through his back, ending his fears forever.

Pensive, Kane looked down at the spear-impaled form, half wondering that he felt no regret. Had the centuries stripped from him every vestige of humanity, then? "There was an outside chance you might have gotten through," he explained to the corpse.

If this sudden flash of violence perturbed the Rillyti, there was no indication. The swamp-dwellers had scattered, although many a hulking form could be seen standing apart or huddled in small groups. Though none came near him, their slitted eyes turned upon him a gaze of unfathomable interest. A low croaking passed among them--harsh rumbling syllables that conveyed a note of urgent excitement.

How long their awe of the bloodstone ring might maintain this nervous truce, Kane cared not to guess. He was gambling on the blighted wisdom of one whose visions brought madness coincident with lost knowledge. To win meant power whose limits Alorri-Zrokros had but hinted; failure would be disaster that similarly confounded human imagination. Since that night in Jhaniikest's tower, Kane had given no thought to the odds.

Warily Kane turned his back on the death-laden portal and stepped determinedly into the street. A few of the Rillyti stood in his path, but as he strode toward them, they shuffled away hastily. As he passed, Kane sensed that the watchers were following at a cautious distance. Continued beyond the gate as the swamp-buried causeway, the main avenue radiated through the Krelran city from its central nave. Garlanded with creepers and sparse undergrowth, its geometric perfection was only slightly hidden by leaning walls and heaps of debris. The colossal dome, now blotting out the setting sun, squatted at the city's heart, its curved walls arched above the peripheral structures in sullen mockery of a rainbow.

Reckless in the presence of that which for weeks had dominated his thoughts, Kane hurried toward his goal. His shallow wounds bled afresh as he clambered over mounds of rubble and impatiently hacked restraining vines. Even in his haste, he noted that the street was in far better repair than its antiquity warranted--though whether this was due to the permanence of Krelran architecture or because the city was not altogether untenanted he could not judge. Behind him sounded the leathery slap of webbed foot, the scratch of claw on stone. The Rillyti shambled in macabre procession and hunched in the shadows as he passed, peering with basilisk intensity from apertures in the time-blasted edifices. Kane absently noted rhythmic syllabism in their subdued croaking-dirge--like in its ominous tone of mingled dread and expectancy.

Framed by the eon-haunted structures that pressed upon the debris-piled avenue, festooned with lianas and spider-rooted trees that insinuated through cracked walls, the colossal dome awaited Kane at the dead city's heart. Fired by the dying sun--or by Kane's fevered imagination--the igneous stone blazed with volcanic hue, conjuring flame images of irresistible summons. It seemed to waver in Kane's vision, and though it beckoned with the compelling lure of flame to moth--promising doom, but with it an infinite moment of unimaginable ecstasy--Kane's purpose was unswerving. His obsession to cleave through the barrier of centuries, to command the secrets of elder-world science, totally consumed him, drove from his thoughts all caution, all doubt. Before him lay the key to incalculable power; every atom of his energy must be directed toward unlocking it. He limped, though unaware of the pain of his wounds, of the sapping agony of exhaustion. The ordeal of wrenching a path through the swamp and the hysteria of headlong battle at death's crumbling precipice had left his spirit numb to further shock. Now he was surrounded by scores of savage batrachians, alone in a lost city whose prehuman antiquity his very presence blasphemed. Kane's mind was twisted to a state of dreamlike clarity and obscurity, his thoughts a dichotomy of inspired certainty, enshrouded disregard. But a demonic haunting that transcended sanity had overshadowed Kane's mind ever since his eyes had first gazed into the bloodstone ring.

Nimbus about the flame, the open plaza encircled the monolithic dome. As Kane emerged from the avenue, it seemed as if the encroaching trees were stunted, twisted by the aura that emanated from the dome, their roots forced into octopoid contortions as they sought to penetrate the court pavement. At closer observation the giant dome was not unmarred by the centuries. Fissures traced patterns across its curvature; in some places, jagged apertures gaped to reveal a double wall cross-braced with struts of bronze alloy. But not even the awesome weight of millennia had conquered this masterwork of alien engineering. Battle-scarred but erect, the dome rose in defiance of time, and only in a few sections did rifts breach both inner and outer wall.

No doorway broke the hemispherical trimness of design. However, as Kane crossed the courtyard, he saw that the avenue led toward an opening in the perimeter, wherein a flight of steps inclined gently downward into darkness. Similar depressions could be seen on either side, and presumably Arellarti's symmetry of design dictated subterranean ramps at each of the seven radial avenues. With the same reckless confidence, Kane descended the oddly spaced steps to the sunken entrance that waited in the dim light below. Sliding doors of bronze alloy stood apart across the semicircular opening, their massive slabs drawn back within the double wall. Entangled vines gave evidence of how long the doorway had lain open, awaiting entrance through its thirty-foot portal--entrance of whom? Kane stepped through.

The dome glowed, not from the sun--the fire was within. Sudden fleeting impressions, noted briefly as attention is swept past, drawn meteorlike to the heart of Arellarti: Vast open space, twilight. The sunlight filtering through fissures in the giant hemisphere in blobs of wan yellow, streaks of starlight dripping across the midnight dome of heaven. Trailing streamers of liana, like clouds against the sky, sick-toned and leprous-fleshed in the weak light. Strewn mounds of fallen rubble, soaring columns of bronze alloy, curved to brace the walls so high above. Pillars of cyclopean machinery, huddled in shrouds of fleshy creeper like brooding sentinels. Fantastic banks of ceramic and stone, metal and crystal--curiously patterned, multihued--all intertwined with mammoth lengths of copper that crawled throughout, like unthinkably huge serpents writhing from a nest of eggs.

And overawing all wonders... Bloodstone!

A gigantic crystal hemisphere nearly a hundred yards across filled the chamber's center, a smooth half-globe of dark green veined with red. Peripheral to its base was a circle of silver-white metal, linked by copper arteries to the looming columns of machinery. The heart of Arellarti did not beat; within the crystal its fires slumbered. But in the dim light Kane recognized immediately the kinship of this monolithic

crystal to the bloodstone ring upon his forger. Passages of the Book of the Elders flashed through his consciousness and bombarded his senses with intolerable excitement as he understood the validity of its eldritch history.

No mine on Earth could have quarried so gigantic a crystal; Bloodstone, like the ring on Kane's hand, had come from beyond the stars. Here under this vast dome lay the culmination of Krelran science, the core of their ancient power. But that power lay dormant, buried by the centuries, and, as with the gemstone of the ring, only an aura of evil hinted of the immeasurable potential quiescent within the crystal's murky depths. No vestige of decay marred Bloodstone, nor did any vine cling to its gleaming curve. A crescent bank of the mottled red igneous stone stood close by Bloodstone, raised somewhat, as an altar before an idol. A bewildering pattern of copper- and silver-toned metal rods, cones and knobs of ceramic, and oddly hued crystal were set into its face, while within the apex of the semicircle lay a yard-wide disk of silver-white metal, from whose center a small black depression stared like a cyclops's eye. From the outer rim of this crescent dais gathered a maze of silver and copper cables, which joined into a central column of silver-white metal five feet across and fused a horizontal link between the instrument bank and the band of similar metal encircling Bloodstone.

It was an altar, observed Kane, noting the thick litter of human and batrachian bones strewn before Bloodstone at this point, the gruesome stains encrusted upon the crescent--grim evidence of the hideous rites men whispered the Rillyti held here. A humerus crunched to powder beneath his boot, testimony to the antiquity of the sacrifice. The anxious croaking of the Rillyti followed him across the dome's interior, a rumbling echo ominous as distant thunder. A monstrous congregation, they shambled behind him into their hoary temple. In the shadow they waited, squatting in puddles of tepid water, leaning on mounds of rubble, peering from behind tangles of leprous vegetation--their savage minds stricken with both anticipation and fear, as they waited to learn if the priest of legend had returned. Bronze swords in webbed hands promised the easiest fate that would await an impostor's unthinkable blasphemy.

Ignoring the Rillyti, Kane concentrated on what Alorri-Zrokros had written concerning Bloodstone--the macabre ritual his sorcery-trained mind had rehearsed, pondered over a thousand times since the reading. Only now his limbs seemed to move automatically, his thoughts incisive with inhuman clarity. The fading rays of daylight gave only splotchy illumination through the cracked dome, but he found this light more than adequate. No fear, no indecision encumbered his movements, and dimly Kane was aware that flashes of knowledge--patterns of thought not his own--were guiding him, drawing him into the ritual.

He mounted the few broad steps of the platform upon which rested the mottled stone crescent, blindly knocking away the skeletal debris. Unbearable tension charged the air like unborn lightning. The bank of instruments consumed his total attention. Jaw set in concentration, eyes hard with intensity, he studied the controls only briefly, so it seemed. Then his long fingers closed upon a silver rod and drew it down. A copper rod next, moved to the right; these ceramic knobs--too large for human grip--to be rotated thus. Kane's darting hands deftly performed intricate movements regarding which Alorri-Zrokros's instructions had been only vague. There was no uncertainty, nor did Kane pause to consult the careful notations he had distilled from the Book of the Elders.

A few levers resisted his strength momentarily, but time had done little damage to the alien machinery. Now the air was charged with more than psychic energy. Howls of fear bleated from the watchers as they were driven back against the shadow of the cracked and curving walls. Blinding bursts of light exploded from long-dead pillars of machinery; sheets of multicolored fire enveloped the serpentine coils of alien metal. A harsh stench like ozone assailed Kane's nostrils, and the air grew thick with reeking smoke as shrouds of fleshy liana peeled away in sizzling, sickly flame. Sparks crackled through the air, blazing within the colossal dome like an insane aurora borealis. A blast of luminous flame lashed out at a group of Rillyti who had cowered too near and left a huddle of blackened death.

Kane laughed in demonic exultation--a macabre figure bespattered in filth and gore, eyes ablaze like blue coals, red hair disordered with static, face transfigured in the chaotic blaze of light. Voice lifted against the crackling explosions, he screamed the chant Alorri-Zrokros had recorded, contorting his throat to shape the inhuman syllables. Rising from the shadow of the dome answered the booming chant of the Rillyti, their fear overcome by need to sound their centuries-unheeded invocation.

Bloodstone lay dormant no longer!

Energy pulsating through its arteries, the heart of Arellarti beat again after millennia of slumber. Eerie fire dawned within its green depths, eternity deep--a glow rising like dawn viewed through dark emerald, shining shifting light upon the walls of the dome. A somewhat darker, more intense gleam, the veins of red pulsed into crimson life, and through its murky translucency these scarlet tendrils twisted fantastically to disappear within the depths of Bloodstone. Incalculable cosmic energies at last unleashed, Bloodstone blazed with a coruscating fire of life.

The frenzied chant of the Rillyti echoed in an inhuman chorus of wonder, of fulfillment, of terror. The final lines of his invocation writhing from drawn lips, Kane stood before the metal circle in the center of the stone crescent. Brushing his fingers over a slash on his shoulder, he smeared the fresh blood across the silver-white disk and anointed the circular depression at its heart. The ring already numbed his hand with an electric tingle as he moved to complete the elder-world ritual.

He knotted his left hand into a fist. The bloodstone ring projected from his clenched fingers, and now he noticed that this gem, too, glowed with life--a miniature counterpart of the titanic crystal ablaze before him. Then, as if stamping his signet to some inconceivable document--a wry thought that thus had been sealed many a sorcerous pact--Kane lowered his fist toward the center of the metal disk.

For the final inches some force seemed to draw his hand like an irresistible magnet. The bloodstone of the ring meshed into the central depression, meeting the blood-dampened metal with an electric crack.

In that instant Kane felt his every cell explode with what was at once unbearable agony and intolerable ecstasy--and transcending both. His entire body snapped into convulsive rigidity as the lightning of the cosmos blasted through his being. A scream was stillborn, never reached his paralyzed throat.

Bloodstone burst into a coruscant nova of raw energy and incandesced into blinding light that for one dreadful instant fully illumined its infinite depths. And from the sentient soul of Bloodstone a bolt of green light veined with red shot out--leaped out to enfold Kane, to bathe Kane in its uncanny fire.

For a long time there was a mind-wrenching chaos of indescribable sensations, tumbling thought patterns not his own, infinite blackness broken by flashes of formless image. Adrift for an eternity in a kaleidoscopic vortex of alien dream, his mind totally intermingled into a cosmic consciousness so impossibly alien that its every whirling mote of thought was incomprehensible--riotous images inconceivable because they were projections of sensory impulses for which there existed no equivalent human receptor.

Dimly Kane retained some shredded gossamer pattern of identity, vestigial awareness of being apart... insight such as comes to a dreamer who is at once conscious that he moves within a dream but is powerless to break from its spell or even to direct its course. He sensed the fabric of his mind, his soul being spread out, probed, examined, inspected with a condescending curiosity, impersonal yet intense.

This psychic vivisection' of his consciousness angered Kane--or that ghost of his mind that now struggled

toward coherent identity. He sought to group together his splintered consciousness, to repel the invading mind which relentlessly pored over the memories inscribed upon his soul. Resistance was encountered, fought against grimly as his enormous psychic vitality waxed strong. Decades devoted to occult studies had given Kane control of hidden resources, pathways of mentality unexplored by all but a few human minds. Startled by this unexpected sortie, the alien mind recoiled, and with a rush Kane reoccupied the strongholds of his consciousness. There followed a sense of baffled surprise at this unanticipated curtailment of its inspection, confidence that such defense could be overcome eventually.

Although the inquisitive dissection of his consciousness subsided, Kane still spun in a mental storm of alien thought. Fragments of image, splinters of sensation grew recognizable to him now, whether from the increasing familiarity of the new perspective, or because the enveloping sentience was shifting its sensory impulses to adapt to human perception, Kane could not tell. Inchoate phenomena were merging into a sequence, falling together like bright tiny bits of continuous mosaic. A picture began to unfold to which Kane's mind could conjecture interpretation from the recognizable fragments, although vast portions of the frieze remained formless patches of inhuman thought, tiles whose colors transcended the known spectrum.

Images coalesced...

Darkness. Indefinite period of waiting, longing. Movement. Progression through time? space? Danger. Energy. Danger narrowly averted. Interminable movement. Flight from danger? Danger in transit? Craving; anticipation. Ebb and flow of vast energies. Patience/despair/anticipation/hope. Termination of movement. Danger. Energy. Danger countered. Fulfillment. Hope.

Light. Transition.

(From a great height) Clouds, sea, land. White blue green red flashes of black. Danger. Closer. Across endless azure ocean to verdant land cloaked in towering dark forest. Danger hidden in forest and sea. Awesome violence of incalculable energy. Steaming rush of sea into glowing wound carved from continent. Destination/haven achieved. Fulfillment. Settling to earth. Hope/ambition.

(Images clearer now, moving with a curiously collapsed flow of time, stylistic representation often merging into pure symbolism.)

An island of raw stone arising from inland sea. Across choppy black water the misty shoreline encompasses horizon. Walls rising, jutting forth from the island like rubrous crystals of hoarfrost. Walls, buildings of outré architecture, network of streets. Beyond, docks and stabbing piers, a great causeway lancing across the sea like a ray of light. A city bursting like some fantastic growth from the earth that was not its mother.

(There is a strange duality. A vantage point both fixed and transitory. Perception from shifting angles, the same instant viewed, projected from varying points. Simultaneous expression through lenses subtly differing.)

Moving forms through the rising city. The Krelran builders--dull-scaled creatures whose ancestry of their degenerate progeny, the Rillyti, was evident. Reptilian assurance, intelligence in their actions. Webbed hands molding the city, leaders directing its architecture to exacting detail. Immense machines crawling throughout, gleaming, tireless as ants busy in their hill. Metal arms lifting colossal blocks of stone. From curious instruments brilliant lances of flame fuse the joints to seamless strength, carve out the precise angles, etch intricate patterns in the faces. Giant vessels like water beetles scuttle across the sea; bronze centipedes hump-backed with loads tread ponderously along the causeway, disgorge mountains of

crushed ore and rubble. Mounds of unguessable material unloaded from elsewhere/above/within. All fed into towering hulks of machine/furnace, transmuted through unimaginable energies, reborn as blocks of red mottled stone, sheets and cables of various metals, materials unidentifiable. Raw substance metabolized into living cells of Arellarti. Workers transport, lay down the skeleton, the structure--create the exact geometries of life/organism. Overhead the vast shadow, rising and falling, wavering. Guard/nourish.

(There is something more here, something veiled. Many doors are closed in blackness, locked, and often their presence obscured. There are two minds that are one, and yet not the same. Each has doors, barriers, has keys that may unlock/open to reveal beyond/secret. Their doors are not the same, nor are their keys--but there are doors sealed with no apparent lock, and keys for which no door is evident.)

Need. The city grows to completion/fulfillment. Urgency. The dome lifts to the sky, enclosing/protecting, nerves/arteries develop apace. Danger grows greater with each day, each day because the city draws closer to completion and defiance of all danger. Hunger for energy burns/craves. Power drained perilously low to give birth to Arellarti. Urgency. Preparations must be complete/matured before attack while energy low. I/We/Being must gamble/risk more energy to accelerate completion before attack/before can defend. Presence known, earlier thrusts just to test strength. They may understand, plan to attack when vulnerability greatest.

Arellarti nears completion. Walls, structures, every cell/nerve close to organic unity. Dome is ready, cupping/enclosing like a protective/sustaining shell, translucent to perception from within/without. Final moment is near. Ship has already transformed/incorporated all but fraction of energy/unity. Embryonic surges of power begin to flow through nascent gridwork. Transmission/transformation/ transmutation of life/awareness is beginning within new organism. The patterns are almost complete. I/We/Being come to life within new energy/ structure.

Life flows. Energy. Birth/emergence/renewal. Sense the triumph of fresh life/energy rush through infant organism.

(There are two--union of duality. Separate the consciousness, know two parts of the whole. One lies within the dome, the crystal monolith. One lies within the ring. Both are one, together Bloodstone, linked together, parallel structure, obey the laws of crystal sentience/symmetry life, to leech the flow of cosmic energy. Within the dome is Bloodstone's consciousness, harnesses the energy of the greater cosmos, coordinates/ governs the power/life. Within the ring lies its parallel self, independent/dependent parasite/symbiote, draws upon the energy of organic/[this plane] life of its bearer. The lord/priest/servant of Bloodstone--external power to manipulate that which cannot be controlled internally--extension of the power/life. Both incarnations are one and essential to the unity. Dichotomy of size/energy cosmic too miniscule illusion/limitation of perception--both equal/essential to laws of symmetry of life/energy being...)

(Block)

Time is very almost [now]. Krelran flash across Arellarti in insane dream speed? slowness? The Master of Bloodstone directs the final preparations. Leader of the Krelran, there gleaming on his thumb where the webbing does not stretch, the bloodstone ring, symbol and instrument of his absolute power. The Master commands, his servants obey. His is the mind that oversees the raising of Arellarti, coordinates the directives that culminate in triumphant life/power.

Danger! Long-dreaded attack at most vulnerable phase! Dark ovoids of metal hover in the sky, hurl incandescent bolts of destroying energy upon Arellarti. A second assault from the sea--rushing teardrop vessels that overpower the ocean channel defenses, lash out at the walls with blasts of unnatural lightning. Too soon! Not enough power yet! Energy screens repel the enemy attack. Counterattack not yet effective. All power concentrated to defense screens. Not enough to hold--penetration! Sections of the city explode under the crackling energy blasts. The gates erupt with a splatter of cinder and fused metal. Hundreds of Krelran die with each failure of the defenses. They rush through the streets in terror-stricken madness. Arellarti writhes in pain.

Betrayal!

(All is chaotic; much is totally obscured. Treachery? Rebellion? Only the most broken images transmit the scene of panic and destruction.)

The Master has broken away! Now at the lowest ebb, greatest drain of energy... he has fled. Controls are locked, all power resources cut off. Trapped--only enough energy to defend the dome. Beyond the dome screens, the city lies in blazing death. Sacrifice unavoidable--last energy must power the dome defense screen.

The traitor escapes. The ship rises into the air. He tries to break through their attack. But he has doomed himself--there are not enough to control the ship, nor sufficient power to defend it long.

(Images separate into bewildering divergence. Only a few intense impressions stand out from the blurred chaos.)

Flight/pursuit/battle. Concussions shake the universe, metal hull fuses and sags. Cannot escape. Defense screens fail. Engines destroyed. Falling, falling. Attack moves away, they pursue the ship, they are burning it from the sky. Strikes the ground, final power absorbs blow, ripping through forest, bursts apart. They have won. Crawl from the wreckage... pain, strength failing. Across the forest, need to get clear. The ship glowing cinders under their fire. Cold. Cold/pain/weakness/ dark...

The attack withdraws, watchful. Satisfied with destruction of ship, Arellarti in ruins. Power broken. Defeat. Only last defense holds. Cannot penetrate. Energy source cut off/locked shut, power grid destroyed. Helpless until [returns]. Need to maintain defense until final reserves exhaust...

The images grew dim, monotonous. Through deep twilight the fallen city was viewed. Survivors crawled about the ruins, broken and leaderless, slipped into degenerate barbarism. Centuries seemed to pass over the slumbering ruins. At times glimpses of strange shapes flashed by, but no new attack came. The sea grew stagnant and receded, left a marshy corpse across which a blighted extension of the surrounding forest crept. The swamp swallowed up Arellarti, stealthily crawled into its empty streets. Time began to rot away even the impervious mottled stone; the central dome itself was not spared.

All power exhausted, Bloodstone lay waiting within the crumbling dome--only the faintest glimmer of crystalline life yet burning. At times the Rillyti, savage misshapen descendants of the city's builders, fearfully entered the chamber to perform certain demented rituals before Bloodstone. In their murky minds' still lived memory of their ancient power, of Bloodstone, but their rites were only superstitious remnants of the old knowledge, useless abominations, seemingly. The secrets of Bloodstone were lost to them--surviving only was twisted legend.

And finally Kane saw himself entering the dome, felt the indescribable hope/craving that

observed/directed his actions. The sudden release of fantastic energy. Freedom from the centuries of powerless waiting. The resurgence of life.

Rebirth!

The alien union of dual existence suddenly returned. But with a significant difference.

Kane was no longer a drifting observer within Bloodstone's consciousness.

The coruscating stream of light that had engulfed him for only seconds receded into Bloodstone, and Kane slumped across the stone crescent in a sleep far deeper than death.

VII

A Priest Comes to Breimen

A flash in the firelight, the dagger spun across the room and stabbed its quivering fang into the overturned table braced against the far wall. The blade's tip was embedded into the edge of one of three tiny circles clustered about the smaller one in the center.

"Twelve more to my total, Teres!" exclaimed Lord Malchion jubilantly. "Make your last throw carefully--you'll need a ten at least, or Lian's gift warms my bed tonight!"

Teres left off from stroking the nervous slave girl's tousled hair, and squinted through the flickering light. "Lying lecher! I can see from here your blade's stuck an inch off the side of your twelve points!"

Lord Malchion drank a derisive toast, wine trickling over mustache as he upended the flagon. "Your eyes that bad, Teres, you'd better concede now, before you gouge up the wall. My blade cuts well into the circle--get your fat ass over here and see for yourself!"

Laughter rumbled from the several other men who lounged about the paneled chamber. "It's half into the circle, all right. You'll need a good throw, Teres," called Lian, as unofficial referee. Lian, a fre lord from Wollendan's northern coast, had only this day pledged his sword and more than two hundred of his men to Malchion's service. The lean captain had presented his new lord with a honey-skinned slave girl, bartered--cheaply for her inexperience--from the tribesmen who roamed the fringes of the Salt Desert upon the Southern Lands' eastern shore. Malchion had responded to the gesture with a sumptuous banquet and, many gallons of wine into the night, Lian was aroused to observe the Breimen lord and his

heir quarreling over first night with the girl. A succession of drunken insults had led to a raucous contest, with chestnut-haired Cosmallen to serve the winner's pleasure.

"Come on, Teres!" Malchion taunted. "Look for yourself, if you won't trust a doting father's word! Come check it before I yank my knife free!" He chuckled with the ebullience of one who expects victory and waved for another cup of the sweet native wine. In younger days men called him "the Wolf," an epithet earned by his feral zest in battle and hunt. Four decades past the day he first drew blood in combat, his ferocity was undimmed, though physically Lord Malchion was beginning to mirror the years of hard living. The Wolf's stocky frame had grown fleshy of late, giving a false impression of corpulence that was denied by the unleached strength of his shoulders, his swaggering step with just the suspicion of a limp. Flushed with the exuberance of wine, his face seemed eased of the lines of age, the stains of riot; no gray streaked his yellow hair, although the disordered tangle of greasy locks began to grow thinner. Malchion stood firm like a great oak against the winds of time, but his teeth showed rot, and one suspected that unseen decay lurked elsewhere, as well.

Teres stood up with a tight-lipped frown and echoed his toast. Wine shone a rivulet along the straight scar that traced an oblique path across beardless cheek. "Shifty tub of guts! Leave your dirk where it stands, or I'll skewer your greedy hand to the board! Let it alone, and in a second you can contrast yours to a well-thrown score!"

The Wolf's cub proffered blue-gray tempered steel to Cosmallen's red lips. "Kiss my blade for luck, pretty-pretty, for you'll find my kisses sweeter than that sway-backed goat's!" Cosmallen uneasily complied.

Calculating the throw with assumed nonchalance, Teres shrugged tension from well-trained muscle and raised the knife. Despite the wine, there was smooth coordination in Teres's arm as it drew back and uncoiled with lithe strength.

The dagger flew toward target with apparent accuracy. But Teres had fumbled the release, and the knife struck the circle hilt first, its impact dislodging Malchion's weapon. Both blades dropped to the floor with a derisive clatter.

"Thoem! That was a lovely bit of work! Damn near stuck that in my foot, you did!" Malchion howled with amusement.

Teres's face was livid. "The knife slipped in my fingers! It was the lip rouge this bitch smeared on the blade! Damn you, you bloated bag of wine puke! Stop your idiot's giggling! No--keep it up till you're apoplectic! I was fouled, and I'll damn well take another throw!"

"Oh, you were fouled--your head befouled with wine!" Malchion crowed. "You asked for her kiss, and you got it--the only one you'll have tonight! As final judge and chief arbiter, I declare myself the winner and this contest ended... before my wolfling's wild casts injure our gentle spectators! Watch the temper, Teres, and next time don't forget whose hands taught you to throw a knife, nor try again to match keenness of eye and head for drink with the old master! Sorry, dear daughter, but Cosmallen is the Wolf's prize tonight! Aahrr-rooo-oo!"

"Take her, then, scheming farthead!" snarled Teres through a gracious smile. "What with wine and old age, I trust she'll sleep soundly... unless snores and foul breath disturb her rest!"

"Thoem, what a mouth to berate another's for foulness!" Malchion exclaimed in unruffled humor. "Were you my son, I'd feed you your ears for insolence! But as my daughter, your mindless insults only uphold

the well-earned reputation of scold, of shrew!"

"Oh, enough of this 'were you my son' bullshit!" Teres yelled, hands clawed. "Try me if you dare test my mettle, and I'll tear off your greasy ears with my teeth!"

"Lovely thing when she's angry, isn't she?" Malchion grinned.

Teres muttered an incoherent string of curses and lapsed into silence, determined not to provide her father further amusement. She clamped her short fingernails between straight teeth in vexation, striving to present an air of aloof dignity.

She was a strange creature, Teres, who had devoted most of her 25 years to denying her femininity, and with startling success. Her features were heavily drawn, though not masculine, and might have been called pretty, but for the thin scar crossing one cheek and a nose twice broken and never perfectly set. Her blond hair she wore in a heavy braid; coiled back over one tanned shoulder, and her ears were pierced to display thick golden rings--neither so much a concession to femininity as an impression of the warrior styles among certain of the barbaric forest clans of Wollendan. Small, high breasts and slim hips were all but concealed under the rough warrior's garb she habitually wore. Years of riding alongside her father to war and to hunt, of drawing bow and raising sword for the most reckless venture, had trained her strength to the equal of many men's--while any weakness was doubly compensated for by the grace and ruthless courage of her sex. Withal, her compactly muscled figure called to mind the lean strength of a man five or more years her junior, but without boyish awkwardness. Teres's was not an unpleasant appearance, although certainly exotic--barbaric perhaps the happiest adjective.

A half-hearted knock announced the entrance of Lord Malchion's chief steward, Embrom. Heedless of the others present, he interrupted the seriocomic tableau to cross the chamber and whisper a few sentences for only his lord's hearing.

"Damn!" Malchion muttered. "The devil calls at the least fortunate hour, so they say. Still..."

He grunted and tossed off his drink with a decisive gesture. "The old master shows compassion for the young punk," he proclaimed somberly. "Teres, I grant you first blush of Cosmallen's yet to be revealed accomplishments. Count this as yet another favor from doting father to unappreciative whelp."

Rising, he nodded to his guests. "Gentlemen, if you will excuse me, exigencies of my disordered household require that I take leave of our learned discourse upon spiritual matters. My servants will see to your needs, should some of you care to further indulge in metaphysical speculations. My cellar library has many an unopened volume of vintage wisdom crying for perusal."

With unsteady dignity he completed his departure. From the halls beyond echoed an enormous belch, followed by an outburst of laughter.

Teres swore and chewed a knuckle, gazing at the long-limbed slave girl as if she would strike her. "That obese goat grants favors as gladly as starved hound bestows a fat chop to stray cat!" she growled. "Go to my chambers, Cosmallen. I'll teach you pleasant games after I've learned what disagreeable schemes dear Father is playing." She stalked from the room with a perfunctory good night.

Nervously Cosmallen glanced toward her late master for some sign of reassurance, but Lian only shrugged and looked into his wine. Reflecting sourly upon the life of uncomplicated luxury that was promised to await beautiful girls in rich courts like Breimen, she wandered off to ask directions to her mistress's chambers.

"That was something of a... ah, bizarre interlude," remarked Lian after a pause. "Whatever happened to that vaunted stern morality of Wollendan's barbarian heritage?"

"A lie, as with most cherished traditions," commented Ossvalt cynically. Malchion's most trusted counselor--or so men said--stirred a gnarled finger through his wine and smoothed his mustache with the reddened tip. "High moral principles," he continued, "are not the sacred heritage of barbarism, anyway--just the revered illusion of peasants in any society. Sour-grapes rationalizing by petty minds relating to all matters which they lack the power and the imagination to master themselves."

"And wine breeds philosophers," thought Lian, who was not yet sufficiently drunk to ponder cosmic vagaries of human reason. "When I purchased the girl," he persisted, "I hadn't thought I'd be provoking a drunken quarrel between father and daughter over who'd drink first from the cup! Was Teres serious about bedding the wench, or was she only sincere in baiting her father?"

"Bright Ommem only knows!" shrugged Ossvalt, licking clean his mustache. "The tales of Teres are as wild as they are many, and since she revels in her infamy, half the stories are probably authored by Teres herself. Wild Teres, the old Wolf's cub grown up deadly as any she-wolf! Teres who dresses like a man, drinks like a man, yearns for battle like a man, rides like a man, fights like a man, curses like a man, loves like a man--excels a man in just about any pretension of virility, so she boasts. Her maids limp around all scratched and bruised, swearing she shaves her face each morning to remove the stubble. That's, a lie, though she'd grow a beard if she could. First broke her nose when she was fifteen--fell off her horse dead drunk trying to ride it through the great hall one night--but she claims it was a battle wound. Scar on her face did come from a battle a few years back--because she scorns to wear a proper helmet. Never lain with a man, but killed or maimed a dozen or more who've tried it, so she claims. Hell, you decide how much or how little to believe... I'd grow sober before I'd recount half her ringing saga!"

"Well, so much for the pristine warrior maid of legend," Lian pronounced. Although Teres's fame had traveled across the Southern Lands, he had found her presence more disconcerting than anticipated. "Still, the whimsy that leads Malchion to indulge his daughter's posturing strikes me as ill-advised. Can't say I'm looking forward to leading my men into combat with a girl ranked above me in order of command."

Ossvalt grew serious. "Understandable sentiments, perhaps, but I'd avoid expressing them in open conversation. Teres's position is unassailable, so far as Malchion is concerned--and the Wolf may grow old, but never question his control of Breimen! We're no squabbling rats' nest of grasping factions like our esteemed friends in Selonari!

"And if you will accept the well-meant advice of one who persuaded Malchion to send for you and your men, cease to think of Teres as anyone other than Malchion's son. To look upon her otherwise is indiscreet, and indiscretions have a way of proving unfortunate for the ambitious."

The remaining revelers were drifting away, leaving the two closeted. Ossvalt leaned on the other's steadier shoulder, sloshing wine on his bare arm, and continued his confidences. "Certainly Malchion considers Teres as his son. She's his closest heir, and the Wolf means to pass on to her all this wealth and power he's fought to consolidate in Breimen. Teres is his only prospect--at least, if he's to have the egotistic pleasure of founding a blood dynasty. So Teres is his son--and since a woman has never really made it as a ruler among the clans of Wollendan, Malchion has spared no pains to mold his daughter into warrior lord. A work of art, that, in a twisted sort of way. Oh, the Wolf's cub has fangs as sharp and ready as the sire. Grizzled old Wolf and snarling she-wolf, to lead the whole damn pack. They're a splendid pair, those two--deserve each other, that's for sure!"

"But a libertine of Malchion's glorious stature must have fathered more than a few sons!" Lian interjected, relaxing his belt a notch.

"Don't know how closely you may have followed events on the southern frontier, Lian," Ossvalt explained, with a thoughtful slap to his expansive middle. "Being close to it all, you forget that the attention of the world may not be focused on Breimen. Anyway, you may recall that Malchion had two sons and a daughter by his first wife... all of whom died before passing infancy. Then Teres, whose birth Melwohna never really recovered from. So he took a second wife when the first died, and Ahranli bore him a son and daughter. Then came the conspiracy of that unhangd traitor Ristkon and his friends, and the three of them were massacred in the botched assassination attempt on Malchion. Third wife was barren, or likely it's true that the Wolf picked up some dread disease whoring with his troops on one of his campaigns. Had a bastard son named Besntuin, for whom he had great hopes at one time. But Besntuin was a halfwit, and it was probably fortunate when he was stomped into the mud by an outraged stallion, before he grew old enough to shave.

"So Teres is heir apparent by default. Got passed over rather callously in her early years. Hell, it was plain enough to a child, even, that Malchion was only interested in a son or three. Suppose that made some impression on her--be a son if you want attention. Never got a lot of that, with her own mother dead, and no other woman she ever got close to, really. Just the Wolf, and he was rough enough to crush any spirit but one that might be swept along with the flood. So Teres was a tomboy far back as anyone ever noticed, and it amused Malchion to encourage her mimicry of himself and his companions. Then after it came about that Teres was his only heir, he devoted his all-out efforts to reshaping her into a son. Taught her to hunt, to ride, to fight--personally oversaw her training in arms. She made him a good enough son, too--I've seen her in battle, and I wouldn't have wanted to face her even in my prime. She could probably fit in among your mercenaries without a hitch, if her sex wasn't known. Probably raise too much hell for discipline, though. Her father and his kind are the only company she's ever kept--treats other women just as a man would. I'm sure she even thinks of herself as a man. Life in Breimen is sure going to be interesting if she succeeds her father."

"Weird!" muttered Lian. "Another round?"

"Why not!" Ossvalt bleakly agreed. "I tell you, Lian, we have fallen upon strange days."

Malchion, meanwhile, having made his departure, followed Embrom in thoughtful silence to his private chambers. The chief steward opened the chamber door for his lord, glanced about the room suspiciously, and stood waiting until Malchion dismissed him with instructions to be certain his privacy was not interrupted. Closing the door behind him, Malchion was alone in the room with the man who had come calling at this late hour of night.

The man who awaited him was featureless within the hooded pelisse that enswathed his massive frame. In the poor light, his face was hidden by the cloak, only the vaguest indication of profile being discernible behind the shadow. Even details of clothing lay submerged, for the cloak's dark blue folds fell to boot top. A series of stylized designs across the shoulder of the garment identified the wearer as an acolyte of some minor outland sect whose followers were known to make lengthy and seemingly pointless pilgrimages Which did not account for the sinister aura that overlay the chamber like the enveloping folds of the stranger's cloak.

The late night visitor, unexpected but not uninvited, filled a second silver chalice with wine as Malchion entered. Part of the sleeve fell back from corded left arm as he replaced the ruby glass decanter, so that lamplight shone upon the ring encircling the middle finger of that hand. The Wolf, whose undimmed eyes

grew more alert with age, noted something altered about the ring, whose striking gem had impressed his attention on an earlier occasion. Absently he realized the nature of the changed appearance: previously the bloodstone ring had fitted very loosely over the finger, while now its circle was closed to the point that the silver-white metal seemed almost set into the flesh. The stranger, then, had found time to have a jeweler adjust the ring's fit.

"Fine hour to make a call," grumbled Malchion, accepting without thanks the proffered cup of his choice wine. "I assume your coming here was not witnessed."

"My information requires your urgent attention; I came when I could," Kane replied, wondering somewhat at the other's petulance. "Needless to say, all my movements have been governed by faultless discretion."

"The words of one of my most gifted spies--before he was assassinated two steps from what I had supposed was a secret entrance to this keep!" Malchion returned. "Well, how did it go, and what can you tell me?"

Kane shrugged back the hood. His face seemed haggard--strange, considering it had only been a few weeks since he had left Breimen bound for Selonari. "It all went smoothly enough," he began. "As I outlined the last time we talked, I slipped out of Breimen without notice, cut north to the coast, caught a ship and doubled west down the coast to Jadenbal. There I made port, got involved in a respectable tavern brawl, and left a discreetly traceable trail from the coast to Selonari. No problem making contact with Dribeck--he's as clever as they say, but what suspicions he may have had were allayed. Wasn't overly difficult to convince him that I was an unemployed mercenary captain a few cuts above the usual grade, and he became interested with little prodding in my yarn about fantastic weapons of elder-world science that lay waiting for someone to claim in a lost city within Kranor-Rill.

"He gave me a small command, which in turn gave me access to a great deal of information that will interest you. So when I decided I'd learned enough of importance, I led an expedition into Kranor-Rill to steal secrets from toads. As I'd expected, the Rillyti were not pleased. I led my men into their ambush, made sure there were no survivors, then escaped through the swamp by another route, stole a horse and rushed back to you. All at considerable risk, I may remind you, for which I expect your promised generous recompense."

"The price was agreed upon," Malchion reminded him.

Kane pursed his lips. "Aspects of our deal were somewhat vague," he persisted. "In view of the importance of--"

From the hallway sounded angry curses, punctuated by a howl of pain. The door was thrown open, hinges rasping in their sockets. Boot still outstretched, Teres half fell through the doorway. "Where are you, you potbellied pervert!" she yelled. "What secret debauchery are you--"

She caught sight of Kane. "Shenan's tits! He's with a priest! The weight of his sins grows too burdensome for the old fart!"

"Shut up, damn it!" growled Malchion. "Close that door before your drunken slobbering upsets everything! "

Embrom's tight face appeared behind her shoulder. "Kicked me in the crotch, she did!" he gasped. "You tell me how I'm going to keep her from busting in! If she was--"

"All right, forget it!" Malchion broke in over the uproar. "Close that damn door and keep it shut! Teres, since you're here, sit down and shut up!"

"Meanest-looking priest I ever saw, that's no lie," observed Teres, dropping to a chair and boldly staring at Kane. "What is it?"

"Kane, this is my notorious daughter, Teres, appearing in all her glory. She throws a dagger side-armed."

"Screw you," she commented dispassionately. "Pour a fellow a drink, how about it, priest? But you're no holy man, are you?"

"She has her father's judgment for character. Kane is--or was, until some drunken ass made public gossip of a secret conference--a most resourceful agent, one I've hired to penetrate Selonari's schemes. He's gained the confidence of that gutless wonder, Dribeck, after considerable effort, so he says, and he was about to enlighten me when you so adroitly joined us."

"Hey, this is a lot better stuff than you were pouring for Lian," Teres commended with a smack of her lips. "Pass the decanter, Kane, and I'll split the rest with you. Good vintage shouldn't be wasted on a bursting wineskin like my father--who's far drunker than me, though with his bulk he sits straighter, that much I'll concede. Kane, you just don't make it as a pilgrim, you know. Those eyes, those hands--you look ready to strangle the first fool who comes to ask your blessing. What dark alley did Malchion find you lurking in?"

"Men of my talents are drawn by the smell of battle," Kane replied vaguely, considering Teres with amused interest. "And this cloak serves to mask my features from Dribeck's spies--which it does well enough with the hood--not to entice gold offerings from the devout."

"Oh, a man of talents sits amongst us," Teres fold her cup.

"We were discussing what you had learned of Dribeck's plans," Malchion reminded.

"No, we were discussing how much my information was worth in coin of the realm," Kane pointed out. Malchion grunted in vexation. The other's insolence grew annoying at times, although Kane's bland self-confidence commanded the Wolf's respect. Breimen's lord had a good eye for ability and was quick to recruit the services of anyone he judged useful, which in part accounted for his success as ruler of the fastest rising city-state in the Southern Lands. He judged Kane's services a worthwhile investment, if the stranger were half as capable as he gave the impression of being, and his loyalty secure so far as gold could buy it--as good a guarantee as any mercenary could be held to.

"Look, Kane," he capitulated with drunken magnanimity, "you know my reputation. Ask around, and you'll hear that I deal fair and square... pay off my debts and collect the ones that are owed me. I pay well for any information that's worth my hearing. We've made a bargain already, but if what you've learned is worth more than we agreed on, I'll be judge of that and pay a fair bonus."

"Fair enough," Kane nodded. "Across the Southern Lands you're known as a man who rewards most generously those who serve well--a reputation, I might add, that drew me to your cause in what seemed an imminent war."

"Seemed?" Teres snorted.

Kane frowned. "Yes. Uncertainty is no longer to be implied. I can tell you point-blank that there shall be war with Selonari. Lord Dribeck intends to maintain his northern frontier by reducing your own outposts along the border. Further, he sees a full-scale war of conquest against Breimen as the only means to consolidate his own authority over the snarling factions in Selonari's long smouldering power struggle."

"This much I've deduced... and had pointed out to me by Ossvalt and other counselors," Malchion sarcastically observed. "Worthless."

"It's not just conjecture, nor is it nothing more than another border skirmish. I've taken part in the training of his troops, and he's recruited well, from mercenaries and from the private armies of Selonari gentry. His army is well armed and disciplined, and will not long confine itself to drill and parades."

"Tavern gossip still. Selonari has blustered without effect for years."

"Dribeck plans to bluff no longer. He means to cross the Macewen River into Breimen lands. I learned a good bit of his designs while I was in Selonari--as well as specific information of troops, armament, tactics..."

"Which interests me--at least, whatever information my other spies haven't already given me. But this is all part of our original bargain, Kane, hardly reason to open my treasury to you."

"I think you'll find my information more accurate and less public," Kane went on smoothly, building with confidence to his masterstroke. "Would I be boring you if I told you that Dribeck has ordered the assassination of Ossvalt and Lutwion as the initial move in his attack?"

Malchion's ruddy features blanched, then flamed anew. Teres jerked erect her sagging frame. "Lutwion! Ossvalt!" He blurted. "My most capable general and the wisest of my advisers! He plots their deaths!"

Kane nodded emphatically. "They're also two of the strongest voices to call for war with Selonari. He intends that their deaths will appear without connection to their political sentiments. Thus he may at once deprive you of their valuable services, while at the same time he removes two who urge you to take steps to counter his secret designs. He both disarms you and lulls you into inattention--and without your suspecting the cause, so that he can continue preparations for invasion."

"I see Dribeck's craftiness hasn't been exaggerated," growled Malchion. "But how does he plan to murder two of my closest associates without directing blame to Selonari?"

"Unfortunately, I could learn few details," Kane explained. "Dribeck admits no one to his full confidence; to press inquiry would have been unfortunate, as well. I only know that he plans their deaths by devious means. There will be no red-daggered assassin for you to capture and put to torture. Further, I know he plans their deaths for successive nights to make coincidence less alarming. And the murders were to take place soon after I left Selonari--he made a reference to the first night of the full moon. That's tonight."

Malchion swore and leaped to his feet, striving to clear his wine-clouded thoughts. "Tonight! Damn you, Kane! Couldn't you have gotten word to me before this?"

"I haven't been in Breimen an hour yet," retorted Kane defensively. "If I'd fled directly from Selonari, I might not have made it to the river--besides which, Dribeck would have been alerted. He would have made new plans, and my subsequent usefulness would be lost to you. I gambled that I would reach you before his assassins could strike. Evidently my timing has held."

"Ommem knows how close you've cut it, though!" Malchion exclaimed, pacing about the room with anxious strides.

"Well, Ossvalt was deep in his cups with Lian, when I left them," Teres pointed out. "So he's reasonably safe in our own keep. But Lutwion left a few hours ago for his manor--you had some off-color comments on his early departure, I recall."

"Then he's in the greater danger!" Malchion concluded. "I'll send a runner to warn him, and a detachment of guards close behind--if it isn't too late! Ossvalt I'll see to personally!"

"Raise your hood, Kane! I'll try to keep your identity hidden, but you're closer to this plot than any of us, and I'll require your presence until I can be confident where I stand!" He rushed from the chamber, howling for Embrom to summon guards.

"Come along, reverend pilgrim," called Teres, steadying herself against Kane's shoulder. "Let's see if Ossvalt needs a priest. Maybe we'll snare us a brace of assassins." The light of excitement shone in her blue eyes, and Kane wondered if she were less drunk than her gait evidenced.

The last revelers had grown tired, and the dark, paneled room was deserted when Teres and Kane returned to the scene of her debauched contest for the slave girl. Doubling back, they reached Ossvalt's chambers before the guard was fully alerted. Lian met them as they entered the corridor.

"Ossvalt! Have you seen Ossvalt?" Teres demanded. "Of course," Lian answered, wondering what new madness his lord's daughter planned with Ossvalt and this foreboding priest. "He holds his cups well, but enough wine will sink any ship. Ossvalt required a little help with the stairs, so I convoyed him to his berth. Out cold when I left him just a moment ago, snoring like a rutting bull."

"Anyone with him?" Teres inquired.

"Alone with his dreams. What's wrong?"

"We've just learned of a plot to assassinate him--Lutwion, too--and probably tonight! Another of Dribeck's bloody schemes! Malchion's off sending word to the general, and he should have ordered guards to Ossvalt's side by now, as well."

"No worry yet," said Lian with drunken assurance. "No one's entered that door since I walked out, and it's a good fifty-foot drop from his windows."

"An assassin could have hidden himself inside," Kane suggested, speaking for the first time.

"True. I didn't bother to poke through his closets," Lian conceded. "Who are you?"

"An ally of dubious integrity, beyond which you don't need to question," Teres said. "You two want to wait for reinforcements while I hunt for an assassin?"

Pushing past the two men, Teres swung open Ossvalt's door and entered. Kane and Lian followed close, the latter with bared sword. Scuffle and clank of harness announced the approach of Malchion's soldiers.

Fully clothed, Ossvalt's corpulent form lay stretched face down across his bed. He made no response to their entry.

"Out cold till morning," judged Lian. Teres was prowling about the room, inspecting each shadow and nook with suspicion. The mercenary captain regarded her movements blearily, then with drunken gravity thrust his sword beneath the bed and knelt down to look for a body. Kane examined the windows for a moment; stone walls plunged sheer into distant darkness.

"As I said, his chambers are empty," Lian pronounced.

Teres grunted. "Leave the shutters open. This room has a sour reek of returned wine." To the entering guardsmen: "Captain, keep three men here beside Ossvalt; the rest in the hall. Do I need to remind any of you about sleeping at your post?"

Kane studied Ossvalt curiously. "I thought you left him snoring."

Lian shrugged. "So? He's rolled over since then. It's a rare man who snores when he sleeps on his belly." Straightening from his inspection of the counselor, Kane remarked, "And a rarer man who can snore when dead--as this man is!"

VIII

Death in the Fog

"A misty night. The sky's clouded over thick as mud--even the moon lies buried. Only light is a greasy flicker of lightning now and then smothered by the clouds, too far away for honest thunder," Lutwion observed, gazing from the window of his manor house. "So it's an assassin's night, after all, even if the moon is wrong. Odd that Dribeck didn't set a moonless night for his assassins to strike. But the man is as unpredictable as he is cunning--a most dangerous combination, to my mind."

"Damn it, Lutwion, can't you stay away from that window?" complained Malchion, harassed and ill-tempered after a sleepless night and frustrating day. "Whatever killed Ossvalt, it must have struck through a window."

"Unless Lian knows more than he tells," Kane commented icily.

"Lian's trustworthy, damn it!" growled Malchion. "I know him, and he has no reason whatsoever to plot with that Selonari schemer. And your inferences had Lian frothing mad--stay away from him, or there'll be blood spilled!"

"Not mine, I think," Kane sneered. "I only put facts together, and if Lian felt insult, perhaps he knows his reasons. As I've said, Dribeck didn't take me into his confidence on this assassination plot, and I don't have to tell you his ways are devious."

"Well, Lian's not with us tonight," broke in Lutwion crisply. "I know the man well enough--he's a tough fighter, a capable leader, and I trust him. Though, under the circumstances, I admit I'd have reservations if another man were in his place last night."

The Breim general slid a bolt through shutters and turned from the window. His sharp features were seamed leather from years and campaigns, his blond hair thin and cut short. No other marks of age did he carry. His blue eyes were bright and alert; there was a spring yet in measured step, sinewy grace of movement, confident strength. His height was well under six feet, but surprisingly long arms and rugged compactness of frame indicated a man who could lead his soldiers into battle. The last two fingers of his left hand were missing half their length.

"And don't chase me from the window like a scolding nurse," Lutwion continued. "Ignorance of your field is the most dangerous error in any situation. After all, this is my own manor. I know my ground here; my retainers are all men I can trust. In addition to the guards you pressed on me, milord, I've positioned my own men throughout the building and grounds--as well as along the nearby streets. Even on this mist-blinded night, an assassin will have little chance to reach this room--and then he will find armed men waiting, rather than the wine-soaked old man whose sleep he made an endless one last night. I only hope he does try to reach me--perhaps he can tell us much before we finish our sport. As for the windows, let them tempt him. He'll have a good climb from the grounds below."

"He had a better climb to Ossvalt's window, and that didn't stop him," Malchion muttered. "If indeed he used the window."

"Yes, if indeed," mused Lutwion. "We know so little. Still, my guess is that the assassin hid in Ossvalt's chambers. He came out after Lian left, probably smothered Ossvalt while he slept, and escaped through the window down a rope, which he then jerked loose. Clear-cut work for any accomplished assassin. I suppose we can't rule out the possibility of sorcery in the murder, but I don't think even Dribeck wants to risk the consequences of unleashed powers of magic in this war. He knows our priests of Ommem can retaliate in kind, and from reports I doubt if he can count on like support from the Temple of Shenan--Gerwein's no friend of his, that's certain."

"I can vouch for that," Kane asserted, "though there seems an element of sorcery to Ossvalt's death. No one seen to enter or leave the room, no mark on the body, no sign of struggle--you would expect that even if he were smothered. The assassin might have had time to rearrange the bedding, but Ossvalt's face wasn't bluish--his features were even composed. You'd have sworn he died of natural causes, if I hadn't warned you of Dribeck's plot. And he wasn't poisoned, so far as we know, since he ate and drank along with everyone else that night."

"I've thought of that," Lutwion remarked, as the door opened to admit a servant with a tray. Nerves had tightened despite his careful knock. Guards stood watchful in the hallway beyond. "And while I'm not exactly fasting, what little I've eaten today has been tasted first by my cooks. Here's cold meat, bread and wine; if you're inclined. My own appetite isn't too keen tonight."

The servant was infected by the atmosphere of tension. His hand trembled nervously as he poured wine, and he clumsily brushed the decanter against a brimming goblet, as he bent to serve Kane. The cowed figure had noted the other's unsteadiness, however, and his left hand flashed from his pelisse to catch up

the overbalanced goblet even as it toppled. Lutwion's eyebrows rose as he witnessed the stranger's startling reflexes. Mumbling apologies, the servant set down his tray and departed. Kane stared after him.

"Why don't you shed that cloak, pilgrim?" Lutwion asked. "My men are trustworthy, if you're concerned about secrecy."

"There is still the matter of an unknown assassin," Malchion explained. "I mean to use the priest here to spy further on Dribeck's plots, and if he's recognized now, his return to Selonari will be unpleasant. I'd rather no one knew his identity. Keeping him here tonight is a calculated risk, but he's closer to this plot than any of us, and I can't spare him. Meanwhile, I'm trying to preserve whatever secrecy I can, about him."

Lutwion looked thoughtfully at the face hidden in the shadow of the hood. "Well, any fool should know he isn't a priest, but so long as you avoid any more exposure than necessary, I doubt if anyone can tell for certain just who is hidden in that pelisse. A spy in Dribeck's midst will be invaluable in the war--and it looks like we'll need to crush Selonari soon, now that Dribeck has shown his intent. A suggestion, though: I'd get rid of that ring. It's quite distinctive, even if prying eyes can't see your face clearly."

"Thanks. I admit your point is valid," Kane replied. "But the ring has proved to bring me luck in the past, and I'm inclined to take the slight chance of its drawing notice."

"Well, it's your neck. Ah! Something's stirred up the hounds! I want to check this!"

Ferocious baying met their ears as they raced to the ground level of the manor house. Men cursed and yelled, shouted challenges. Loud but brief, the alarm had diminished by the time Lutwion shouldered his way through the main door and demanded an account from the milling guardsmen.

A familiar laugh greeted them. "Lutwion, your security stinks!" grinned Teres, her teeth bright against a soot-smearred face. "I got all the way to your servants' quarters and just about had a window forced, before your pack caught my trail. You'll never make it to morning if you trust these men with your safety. The kennels look to be best guarded--pass the night there."

"I thought you wanted to keep an eye on Lian," Malchion reminded. There was pride in the smile he flashed toward his daughter.

"Lian is interesting only if you share his enthusiasm for Lian. I don't. Besides, he's no tool of Dribeck. I thought I'd come watch you men snare an assassin."

"Milord! She knocked two of our men out cold, and damn well split Osbun's scalp open!" protested one of Lutwion's captains sourly.

"An assassin would have split their skulls. Next time they'll man their posts more vigilantly," Teres purred.

"Yeah? Well, Osbun says he challenged you in the alley, and you identified yourself to him--then as soon as he let you approach, you slugged him with a bludgeon!"

"So next time he won't be lulled by a voice of authority. It's a dark night, and I might have been disguised," Teres continued imperturbably.

Lutwion ordered his men back to their posts, his mood stormy. "I appreciate your interest," he said

unconvincingly. His frown was genuine. "Thanks to your concern, my men are riled up, my defenses are revealed, and we've made enough uproar to frighten any assassin back to Selonari. That is, if he hasn't used this confusion to slip by my guards!"

"Hell, in the same breath you bitch at me for scaring off your killer, then for letting him sneak past!" Teres scoffed. She nodded at Kane. "Well, here it is again--Father's personal spiritual guide. Sometime I'm going to see what you look like without that tent, Kane.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she apologized without conviction. "And we're trying so hard to keep your identity a secret. Well, there's no one in earshot except Lutwion, and our good general won't abuse his knowledge."

Kane caught Teres's mocking blue eyes and wondered again at the destructive malice of her whims. "Which side are you on?" he murmured to her in low voice.

"An intriguing question coming from you, my pilgrim," she remarked with a bright smile.

"While we're about, might as well patrol the manor," Lutwion decided. "If we find our killer skulking about, Teres can show us how to deal with him properly."

Teres's appearance had somewhat lessened the tautness of nerve among those who waited through the night. Malchion argued that their precautions had thwarted Dribeck's assassin, since the original plot assumed that Ossvalt's death would appear natural, and Lutwion therefore would have suspected nothing. Which meant, as Teres pointed out, that now Lutwion dare not relax his vigilance. The general said little, being not surprisingly in a grim mood.

A night passed under threat of death seems interminable, and paradoxically, boredom wallows across the mind alongside fear's shrill and ceaseless chatter. But for the alert bearing, the darting glance into every shadow, distracted conversation often left unfinished, Lutwion might well be leading his guests on a leisurely tour of his manor. No furtive movements, no sinister figures met their inspection; guards had only negative responses to their queries.

Momentarily the general paused at the doorway of his bedchamber. "An obvious place for the assassin to wait; if our reconstruction of last night holds true," he told them. "Empty when we examined the room earlier this evening... but now? Well, I've stationed a guard within. The murderer will have to take second choice for a place to hide himself, if he tries to repeat his game."

But as they stepped into the chamber, no challenge greeted them. Teres laughed and pointed. A soldier in Lutwion's livery reclined upon the general's bed.

"Bright Ommem roast your liver, soldier!" Lutwion roared. "You never could have chosen a worse post to sleep on! I'll lash your back to raven meat with these hands!"

The guardsman slept soundly--nor would he ever waken.

"Dead! Dead like Ossvalt!" gasped Malchion, roughly shaking the prone form.

"Not long dead, either," Kane pronounced. "His flesh is warm and limber, but the- heart is still."

Guards poured in from the hallway at Lutwion's bellow. Bleakly he directed them to search the chambers thoroughly, then joined the examination of the slain guardsman. Their efforts yielded nothing.

Kane inspected the windows thoughtfully. "Shutters are bolted securely. The killer didn't leave through here this time. The hall door then, obviously, but why kill the guard? Probably surprised the assassin, but why was there no outcry? Why wasn't he seen leaving?" His fingers drew back the shutter bolts.

"Leave them open, will you?" Teres requested over the hubub of conjecture. "The room has a sour stench of death--" Her features froze as recognition dawned.

"By Thoen! Just like the odor I sensed in Ossvalt's room last night!"

The others turned toward her, bewilderment on their faces. "Maybe so," Kane began. "Though how this hypothetical stench of death might fit in seems a tenuous link at best. I'm not sure myself that there's anything more here than what you can expect from a corpse in a closed chamber..."

Knuckles jammed against teeth, Teres studied the slain guard intently. Falling to her knees, she stared closely at the dead face. "No, there's something here! Why were both bodies found as if asleep? Ossvalt maybe was killed in his sleep... but the guard, too? There has to be a link-and bugger my ass if I don't think I see it now!"

Flashing out her dagger, Teres tore loose a strip of cloth from the black shirt she wore. She breathed heavily upon it several times, then with cautious movements began to rub the dampened patch across the pillows. Rising, she thrust it under a lamp and cried out, "I know how they died!"

Malchion looked over her shoulder quizzically. "So you've found some dandruff!"

"Not dandruff, dumbass!" Teres snorted. "See those pale tiny particles! They're grains of poison!" The others crowded about to share examination.

"See... they're tiny crystals! The Carsultyal wizards refine the powder from the roots or blossoms of some malign jungle flowers--they're masters of subtle poisons!"

"What do you know about it!" scoffed Lutwion, though his sweaty face was not drawn in ridicule.

"Vyrel, our moss-bearded physician, told me a good many bits of arcane lore to pass the time when I was bedridden in his care with my busted leg. He studied for a while in Carsultyal--long enough to acquire a few of their secrets and their vices. He used some milder preparations of this sort to dull my pain at first. Ommem! The dreams I had! And he used to inhale the fumes of his powders himself in an intricate sort of pipe--probably what killed him eventually--and that's how I remembered the odor. This must be one of the deadlier of the preparations that the wizards play with.

"The assassin slipped into the bedchamber, sprinkled the powder from a sealed flask over the pillows, then walked away. A sleeper wouldn't notice them, they're so few and so tiny... but some would be absorbed through his face on contact, killing silently."

"They're vanishing!" Lutwion exclaimed, pointing to the deadly particles.

"It seems they're volatile," Teres speculated. "They melt away in air--leave no trace after a few hours, other than the faint odor." As they watched, the crystals diminished to rapidly fading motes of moisture. "Guess the heat from the lamp speeds up the sublimation... like Vyrel's strange pipe."

The others nodded hypnotically, eyes glazed as they stared at the patch of dark cloth. Teres started to

slump. "The windows! Damn it, throw open those windows!" yelled Kane, who had drifted apart from their cluster. "Drop that cloth, and come suck some clean air into your chests! The fumes are more potent than you realize!"

Like sleepwalkers they obeyed, shuffling with groggy movements to the windows as the guards swung open the shutters. Dully they leaned their heads into the misty night, mechanically breathing in deep lungfuls of the fresh air.

"Like being drunk, almost--very drunk," Teres murmured, her head slowly clearing.

"If you'd kept at it, you'd never wake for the hangover," Kane warned. "The mystery of the guard's death is cleared up, though. The assassin, who obviously visited this room before the guard took his post, sprinkled too much poison over the pillows--probably so there would still remain crystals when Lutwion at last decided to sleep. In the closed bedchamber the vapors accumulated, so that the hidden guardsman grew sleepy under the poisoned breath. The bed tempted his faltering senses, and he fell into the deathtrap set for Lutwion."

"So it wasn't sorcery," mused Lutwion, recovering alertness. "Unless the killer is a wraith. Either he totally eluded my guards, or I'm left with the unpleasant conclusion that one of my men is a traitor!"

Through the gaping windows coursed a call of alarm from the hidden depths of night. A hoarse shout of challenge muffled in the distance, with a rising tone of insistence. Angry summons for help, answered by converging clamor of excited cries, pounding boots. "Milords!" came an anonymous yell from below. "Milords! We've spotted him! Some bastard just tried to sneak past our lines! Headed away from the manor! He broke and ran when we sighted him--but we're hot after him! He'll not slip through our outlying perimeter!"

"Good work!" roared Lutwion, leaning perilously from the window. "It's our killer! Take him alive if you can, but fog or no fog, I want that devil run to earth! I'm coming out!"

He whirled to the others, eyes alight. "Well, I'll soon know who the traitor is, if he's one of my men! Thoem, what a dismal night to track a killer! Every man after him, now! That slinking murderer must be taken before he breaks past my net!"

Into the night they plunged. Lutwion vanished with several of his guards; his sharp voice cut through the darkness, directing his men in their search. Despite his orders, the military precision of his deployment, confusion was master.

Teres quickly separated from the others. Invisible in her black, close-fitting garments, her face smudged with soot, she merged with the night like a she-wolf on the hunt. A torch would only give away her position; the assassin needed no light, nor did she. Her sword rested easily in her grip; her heart raced dizzily in fierce thrill. Perhaps the drug still twisted her mind. A looming guardsman missed death by a hairbreadth, and she answered his curses with laughter.

With every ruthless trick, the night fought their efforts to penetrate its veil. No worse night could be designed for their deadly manhunt. Fog rolled in oily streamers and touched cheeks with palpable breath, cool as a corpse's caress. Lost cries, voices came muffled to dreamlike distance through the enveloping swirl. Dozens of armed men rushed madly about her, but none could be seen. Phantoms of fog they were, frantic spirits that darted into view for a heartbeat, then vanished. Misty jewels, their torches seemed glowing patches of spider-silk, casting illumination scarcely far enough to touch earth.

The moon was swallowed entirely in the morass of clouds, roiling heavily across the skies. Sporadic flashes of lightning made wan flickers behind the cloudbank, silhouetting for an instant dim patterns grotesquely writhing against the heavens. Belated thunder rumbled ominously, distant but growing near, fitful as a sleeping hound's growl. Through this night the search dragged on, spreading outward now.

Teres felt the streets beneath her boots and sensed the darker shadow of an unseen building. Her steps had taken her beyond the grounds of Lutwion's manor, into the adjacent portion of the city. Voices yet called through the viscous darkness. Lutwion had posted men along nearby streets and alleys; his net was flung wide, and now it drew back. But had the assassin slipped through its mesh? After all, Teres reminded herself, they knew not the face of the man they hunted. If he were one of the general's retainers, might not he have joined with his pursuers until a better chance for escape presented?

She froze in abrupt fear. From beyond her the fog was sundered by a shriek of terror! A mindless scream of stark horror, of unendurable agony, burst from the night; she could not say whether it came from one voice or several. Almost as its ragged note rose forth, the unearthly anguish broke off, silenced with grim finality. And Teres, who counted her nerve better than any man's, caught her breath with a shudder.

Teeth fixed in lip, pain calling her to reality, Teres fought to quell the panic in her heart. Slowly she drove the ice-tingle from her body, held her swordpoint steady before her. Had she imagined it, or had she glimpsed a sickly flicker of greenish light through the fog, just as the scream had reached her? Lightning reflected? Nerves?

There was sudden stillness all around... for what seemed an interminable space. Then she heard pounding footsteps close by. Lips drawn in a snarl, she poised her blade for the killing thrust.

"Steady, Teres! It's Kane," breathed a voice from a shadow she could dimly make out. She was too shaken to wonder until later how the stranger could see her this clearly in the darkness.

"That cry!" she mumbled.

"Came from close by--there's an alley leading off here, I think," Kane finished. "I was trailing someone who seemed in a greater hurry to leave than to join in the search. Lost him near here only a few minutes ago. Didn't give the alarm, because I figured he'd take off and escape cleanly before others could get here. I was trying to cut across his trail when I heard that scream. We'd better stay together till we know what's behind this."

For once, Teres felt glad for companionship. Shoulder to shoulder they moved toward the point from which the cry had seemed to originate. Men with torches ran to join them, casting light over the grisly scene they discovered.

Four men lay dead at the mouth of an alley. Three were soldiers; the fourth was Lutwion.

Their bodies lay twisted in grotesque angles, contorted as if they had been hurled back by some unthinkable force. Flesh seemed shrunken, features frozen masks of agonized dread. There was no need to feel for life. On each body glowered a brand of blackened flesh, smouldering clothing--a matted crater etched into human tissue, bridged by splinters of charred bone. It was as if the dead men had been struck by a stream of molten iron.

"What kills like that?" someone moaned.

"Lightning?" wondered Teres. "Could they have been hit by lightning? I thought I saw a flash of lightning from this spot. Look--that man's sword is fused to his arm!"

"Lightning, could be!" growled Malchion savagely. "A fine coincidence, though, for Dribeck! More likely the scheming coward has meddled with sorcery for this deed! Well, by Ommem, I swear to you--Selonari will think lightning's blasted her towers when I march south! I'll roast Dribeck over a fire of his precious books and wash the streets with the blood of his people!"

He drew Kane aside, so that only Teres overheard their words. "Get back to Selonari as fast as you're able! I know your risk is triple now, but the plunder of that city will glut even your lust for wealth if you serve me well in this! Get me any information you can smuggle out--you know my agents there! My army will march for the Macewen as quick as I can muster, and I need to know every foul trick Dribeck's cunning mind is plotting!"

"You'll hear from me soon!" promised Kane. He melted into the fog.

IX

War Eagles Gather

"I tell you true!" swore Havern, red wine squirting through rotted teeth as he gulped too great a mouthful. "There's riot and plunder gonna be, like there never was before, no lie!"

"Gimme that bladder, fartmouth! You're slobbering more than swallowing!" complained Wessa, pawing at the wineskin with his good hand. "Damn... another leak! We'll have to finish this up!" He raised the skin to his lips and sucked noisily as a stream from the puncture sprayed over his filthy beard.

"No need to spare it, Wessa sweet. What I'm telling you is we can soon be fat and greasy as lords at an orgy!" He paused to blow his nose with his finger, narrowly missing the other. "Snurk! Let me have that back now, Wessa, come on."

"Here... fire your slosh-brains with more booze dreams!" sneered Wessa, surrendering the wineskin. "Back off, Havern, you gonna fall over and knock me in the river maybe in a minute. Thoem's left ball! See that mother of a rat there! He's a banquet for the both of us!"

Snatching a stone from the riverbank, he threw it after the rat, missing by several feet. "Damn! If I had the strength in my other arm! Been six years since that bastard's mace messed me up!" Whining, he

began to suck the wine from his scraggly beard.

"That rat's gonna get his pack together and come back here looking to pick our bones, sure enough," warned Havern. "I'm telling you, though, we'll soon be gorging ourselves on roasts and sweetmeats, Wessa. All the food and wine our guts can hold, all the women our hands can fondle, all the riches our backs can carry away! Ours for the grabbing, that's no lie! Word's everywhere. Old Malchion's sending an army with his bitch daughter to march on Selonari. He's gonna burn that craphole to the ground, and there'll be looting like you never believed!"

Wessa reclaimed the wineskin. "Maybe so, but a man could get his head pushed out his ass with all the fighting," he said morosely. "No pity for a one-armed man in war."

"Your bad arm can hold a shield," Havern judged. "Who's gonna do any fighting, anyway, I want to know? Not us. We'll follow along old Wolf's soldiers, and let them do all the work of killing and dying. Once Selonari falls, we just step in and help ourselves. Safer than staying in Breimen, 'cause no guards gonna come running when you cut a throat! Hell, Wessa, every free rogue in Breimen's gonna follow along for a slice of the spoils!"

"Well, I figure we can't do much worse than what we are," Wessa conceded. His rheumy eyes grew crafty in greedy vision.

"You know it's gonna be the sweetest tit we ever chewed!" promised Havern, waving the flaccid wineskin grandly. They stumbled along Breimen's waterfront for a space in thoughtful silence, broken only by Havern's wheezing cough, and gurgling smacks as they squeezed at the bladder.

"Well, we found us one, Havern dear," observed Wessa with a cackle. "River left, us a prize here, sure enough, and with luck we're first to find him!" He pointed to a dark shape bobbing face down against the rocks.

Eagerly they clambered to the water's edge and hauled the corpse onto the bank. "Someone's been up to deviltry," smirked Havern, as they pawed through the dead man's clothing. "Didn't bother to weight the stir, so the current washed him back along the eddy. Knew this was a lucky night for us to scavenge!"

"Wearing livery of some lord, but this knife's too good for a servant, and here's gold growing stale in his almoner. Too bad the way his chest is all burned up, but maybe the vest can be patched over. Wonder what they done to him to kill a man like this! Shit, Havern, look at the bastard's face!"

"Pretty," remarked his comrade. "You know, I bet those boots will about fit me."

A Stranger Returns

Wind rippling his mane, the stallion wanted to canter, and Lord Dribeck decided to give his steed a good run, once he completed inspection rounds. Brisk exercise might relax them both, loosen the tightness in his belly. A short gallop across the martial field and down a forest trail--to Dribeck, who was a better horseman than most of his officers, the prospect would be an exhilarating interval from the tension that hung over Selonari like the thunderclouds of war.

"I had about given you up for dead," he remarked, "even with my high regard for your capabilities. The men you left with the horses at length reported your disappearance, and when the small search party I sent to investigate also failed to return, it seemed that Kranor-Rill would hold yet another secret in its depths. Reports from the vicinity give out that the Rillyti are prowling about even into the forest fringe, and there's more than the usual flow of tales concerning strange activity in the heart of the swamp--curious sounds, sinister lights glimpsed through the mists, and the like.

"Probably accounts for the enthusiastic response my call for new troops drew from the southern frontier. Well, I shouldn't be cynical. All of Selonari's people are rallying to the city. If Malchion takes Selonari, our settlements fall spoils, and our free farmers will be Wollendan serfs."

"Kranor-Rill and its deadly children very nearly did claim me," Kane reflected, riding beside Dribeck. Bath, sleep, fresh garments transformed him from the grim, swamp-stained wanderer who had wearily ridden into Selonari the day before, but there remained a haggardness about him that had not been present earlier.

To Dribeck's anxious questions, Kane had unfolded a terrifying narrative of his ill-fated expedition to the hidden ruins of Arellarti. Several days spent searching the swamp-buried city had unearthed nothing of practical value. Meanwhile, the Rillyti had encircled their camp with ever growing numbers, until Kane was forced to break for the forestlands before the batrachian hordes decided to attack. Once beyond the city walls, Kane's party was ambushed and annihilated by the enraged creatures. Kane and a few others had fled into the swamp, where Kane wandered lost for several days, somehow eluding the Rillyti and the countless other perils of Kranor-Rill, until he at last crawled onto firm ground to return to Selonari. Evidently none of the others had survived the ordeal. At Kane's suggestion that further exploration might yet lead to some valuable discoveries, Dribeck balked, arguing that he had no more men to waste.

"I'll admit I'm relieved to have you with me once again," Lord Dribeck confided, as they rode past the confused mustering of new troops. "There's been hell to pay while you were gone, and frankly I value your assistance. Shenan knows, I'll need every resource I can draw upon, if my rule here is going to last out the month. There's madness loose in Breimen--old Malchion's henchmen murdered under fantastic circumstances--and the Wolf is using this as a final excuse for war. Had a spy planted in Lutwion's household, who might have known the truth behind all this wild talk of sorcery, but he vanished without a word to me. Malchion's marshaled his army for the conquest of Selonari, and I've only a few days to make a defense.

"Well, I've known for years Wollendan's blond raiders would someday decide to swallow up Selonari like they treated the other old states of the northern coast. I've never succeeded in impressing the danger upon the popular mind. The city could well be an ash heap in a few days, but my gentry still line up in their petty jealous factions, and the Temple refuses to submit to taxation. All I could get Gerwein to agree

to, without forcing the issue at an untimely moment, was a 'gracious donation' of the Temple guard and a few tidbits of their hoarded wealth. At least she sends me well-trained soldiery--not to disparage the stalwart freeman, but a professional soldier is worth any five amateurs, just intentions be damned."

He pointed to a thin and scar faced officer, who directed the cavalry drill--mercenaries, by the mixture of nationalities his men represented. The tall man's blond hair was noteworthy among the ranks of dark-haired Selonari. "That's Ristkon, Malchion's old enemy, who came so near to wresting Breimen from the Wolf," explained Dribeck with some pride. "I learned where he had fled after his rebellion collapsed, and approached him. Ristkon was aglow for the chance to avenge his old defeat--brought his own company of cavalry along."

"So hate is stronger than clan loyalties," remarked Kane. "You've found a doubly valued ally there."

"I've a company for you to command, as well, Kane," Dribeck reminded him. "Coordination will be a major problem in meeting the Breim army, and the man who can surmount all this disorder might find himself quickly installed as my chief lieutenant."

"I appreciate your hint," Kane acknowledged through a grin. "The value of such promotion would seem, then, to balance on our victory. After all, few conquerors trouble to hang a defeated foot-soldier."

XI

Thunderclouds of War

The first arrows swept across the morning sky in a sudden gust, prelude to the impending storm. An engineer clutched his throat and toppled from the thrusting bridge into the river; others cursed as iron fangs struck at exposed limbs and challenged mail tunics. Stolidly, guards stepped forward to raise outsize shields over the workmen, trusting that their light armor would turn back most of the arrows, while the shoulder-high framework at the bridge's advancing edge would form a barrier against direct fire. From the Breim shore of the Macewen River hissed an answering barrage of arrows, striking the heavily forested bank opposite without observable effect.

"Well, we got midway across the Macewen before Selonari arrived to dispute our crossing," remarked Teres, squinting into the dense forest beyond the flood plain. "Dribeck must be marshaling his full strength to block us here, but I can't see for shit how many he's brought up just now. Be good to finish that bridge before his entire force gathers to welcome us to our new lands."

Malchion grunted noncommittally, intent on the progress of the bridge. Unofficial boundary between the holdings of the two city-states, the Macewen River sprang from mountain streams of the Great Ocalidad range, then cut southwest across the Southern Lands to reach the Western Sea at Serpent's Tail, flowing through the same precipitous gap through which drained Kranor-Rill. Breimen and Selonari stood along tributary rivers, the Clasten and Neltoben, which joined the Macewen farther downstream from this spot--some eighty to ninety miles from either city. Short of marching northeast to the foothills of the Great Ocalidads, there were only two stretches where the Macewen might safely be forded at this season. Word had reached Malchion from Kane that Dribeck had divided his army to guard either fording. The Wolf had then prepared to bridge the Macewen at a point where the river flowed languidly through wide channels.

Thus to the Macewen Breim wagons had carried preconstructed segments of floating bridge--pontoons like enclosed rowboats, wide sections of thick planks for decking, poles to drive into the river bed for anchoring the structure. By moonlight engineers had rowed across the river to fasten stout rope cables to trees on the far shore. While carpenters busily lashed and hammered together new sections, completed ones were floated into the stream, joined end to end along the taut cables, then lashed to slanting piles driven into the mud. Construction moved swiftly, so that as the sun warmed dawn to morning, the bridge spanned a good three-quarters of the river.

Then the death song of arrows announced the arrival of Dribeck's forces. Unable to judge the effectiveness of his return barrage, Malchion ordered his archers to maintain cover fire, as well as they might, with the far bank virtually out of bowshot. After the initial pause, progress on the bridge continued, although at slower pace, as the workers labored behind shield-work, passing back to shore those whom a well-aimed shaft sought out.

Teres felt her pulse quicken as the scent of battle reached her flared nostrils. Her warhorse, Gwellines, stamped his hooves and snorted. Beneath her tunic of light mail she wore a jerkin of tough black leather, sewn with sections of scoured iron and cups of gray metal to enclose her breasts. Leather trousers of like pattern belled to cover booted calves. An iron casque covered her head, but left her face bare. Adornment of accouterments Teres shunned; in combat she relied on speed and lithe agility to offset her opponents' advantage in bulk, and extra weight she deemed a useless encumbrance. Her martial display, she boasted, lay in the deadly beauty of striking steel.

"Lian may have trouble holding the far shore, if Dribeck mounts too powerful a defense before the bridge is done," she commented, needling Malchion. Teres had argued for ferrying half the men across first, thereby securing both banks before turning to bridge construction. Such would have been Lutwion's counsel, she advised. Gruffly Malchion proclaimed that he had won battles without Lutwion's counsel, and he didn't need a spokesman for the general's ghost. They marched with siege machinery and supplies for reducing Selonari, and they'd save time and effort to bridge the Macewen now. Extra boats were needless freight. They'd invade Dribeck's lands before he could regroup his army from its encampment by the fordings.

The Wolf bared his teeth. "We'll have the bridge completed in another hour. Lian's got near two hundred men to defend the bridgehead, and that'll keep off this skulking band of archers. We'll cross in good time before Dribeck can do anything about it. Hell, there can't be fifty or a hundred men hiding in that forest cover, or they'd have rushed Lian before now." Sucking air through teeth with a half musical hiss, he considered the forest thoughtfully.

But on the Selonari shore there were more than a handful of soldiers that awaited the Wolf's army. Had any of Lian's scouts lived past the discovery, they might have reported that Lord Dribeck and over three thousand of his soldiers stood ready within the forest. Dribeck's own scouts had kept him informed of

Malchion's march, sending word of his movements back by carrier pigeon. By forced march, Dribeck had led his army through the night to take position confronting Breimen's invasion of Selonari lands.

Shedding his blue cloak as the sun stole through the forest wall, Lord Dribeck raised in his stirrups to get a better view of the advancing enemy. "Bridge is coming on steadily, though my archers have made things tense for them," he observed. "Malchion will try to cross by the time the mists start to dry away." From beside the Selonari lord, Kane made an affirmative sound. His long fingers stroked the blade of Carsulyal steel, as if to caress its lethal strength a last time before its edge was stained and blunted by combat. "Giving out that you planned to meet the Wolf beside the fording was a well-conceived ploy," he commended.

"When outnumbered, look to strength in strategy," Dribeck quoted. "Though there's no harm in having superiority in strength and in strategy. Still, there weren't too many choices for Malchion to cross the Macewen. With all his plans to lay siege, he had to cross within access to a serviceable wagon road, and that makes it easier to pinpoint his course south."

He paused to wipe his forehead. It would seem that a certain measure of calmness could be maintained so long as he contrived to view this intellectually, as a tactical exercise rather than deadly combat. But as the battle drew nearer, Dribeck conceded that emotion laughed at the frail bonds of intellect. Kane, on the other hand, seemed to feel no tension--if anything, gave the appearance of impatience. Dribeck shrugged mentally.

"When conflict is inevitable, then choose the battleground," he again quoted. Kane laughed softly. Dribeck had made use of this axiom in planning his campaign. Thus they awaited the Breim army within the forest depths, seeking only to slow their crossing, when they might have thrown back Malchion's tentative thrust. But sooner or later, the Wolf would force crossing, and Dribeck intended this to take place on his terms. "Strategy is a fine game," murmured Kane, "but its brilliance is usually a matter of retrospect. War isn't a rational science, and steel and blood have decided many a battle that logic had won for the vanquished."

"Kane, your thoughts are as comforting as a raven's croak." Dribeck fumbled with a small flask. "Join me in a mouthful of brandy?"

Kane accepted the proffered flask. "To victory!" he toasted with a smile. As Malchion had predicted, by the end of an hour the river was bridged. On the Selonari shore, Lian's men hurried beneath the desultory sniping to lash firm the final pontoon sections. Sheltered somewhat by felled trees, he and his detachment had concentrated on holding the bridgehead. After a few tentative sorties were driven back, Lian had judged the hidden archers too minor a danger to justify a concerted advance before the main body of troops could cross. A cheer rose from the beleaguered vanguard as the shores were linked.

Teres spurred her stallion to the riverbank. At her insistence, she was to lead the first thrust--nor had Malchion begrudged her this perilous honor. "Follow me, you puke-blooded sons of whores," she howled, brandishing sword in fist. "I'll lead you straight to Hell and glory, and strangle with my boot the first bastard who looks back before we set Selonari ablaze!"

The pontoons thrummed like war drums beneath the stallions' hooves, swelled to percussive symphony with the pounding boots, clanking, jingling of harness and steel, hoarse battle cries of soldiers, wild trumpeting of mounts. The bridge trembled and slapped spreading waves across the dark current, but bore stolidly the tread of an army upon its back.

Across the Macewen Malchion's army marched, thrusting a glittering tentacle of war into Selonari lands.

Separating from the massed strength on the Breim shore came closed ranks of infantry, with companies of light cavalry--few in number since the great forests precluded most cavalry tactics and left only a supportive role for the mounted soldier. Boldly accoutered officers rode or marched beside their men, yelling orders and encouragement against the uproar. Farther back on the shore reposed wagons of ponderous siege machinery, of supplies to sustain the invading army. Behind these waited the jackals, the vultures--bands of human scavengers voracious for the spoils of battle, allies not even of one another.

Perhaps a quarter of Malchion's army had crossed when Lord Dribeck launched his counterattack. The shower of arrows suddenly became a punishing hail of death, sweeping like a demon wind through the tight ranks. Horses screamed and fell, entangled flailing hooves with thrashing bodies of soldiers. Progress across the bridge faltered as jumbled bodies of the fallen and blood-slick planks made a chaos to dam the flow of men. Behind them the Breim archers could not return fire--for, thus far the only targets were their fellows. At the bridgehead men cursed and died, fighting for whatever shelter was offered from the relentless rain of iron-toothed shafts.

"Push forward!" screamed Teres, defying the death that fell about her. "Break into the forest! You're nothing but targets here! Forward and close with these slinking bandits! Cram your steel through the archers' bellies, and they'll cease to strafe us! Forward, damn you! Make way for your comrades to cross over!"

Shields braced against streaking arrows, the Breim soldiers surged over the riverbank, across the flood plain, and plunged into the heavy forest beyond. War cries roared with harsh anger as they raced to slake their fury with the blood of the hidden enemy.

"Kane! Ovstal! Ivocel! Bring up your companies!" Dribeck ordered, as the Breim army rushed toward them.

The ranks of archers parted to give passage to the Selonari heavy infantry. Forward they marched, shields raised, weapons poised to strike--swords, axes, spears, maces--the backbone of Dribeck's army crunching forward to break the Breim charge. For as the battle reached into the forest, archery would be no longer effective, nor would the field permit sophisticated tactics or formation. This would be pitched combat, hand to hand, steel against steel, and muscle and nerve would decide victory now.

The two lines swept together and struck like two raging storm fronts. Lightning crashed and flickered as blade met blade, thunder rolled and echoed the mindless roar of battle, the clangor of striking steel, the howl of violent death. And the ground grew darkly sodden with the splash of crimson rain.

Sword flashing, Teres entered battle with a wild yell. Gwellines reared, eyes rolling, nostrils flared, as the tide of war washed over them. His hooves lashed out, caught an enemy in the face. Teres's sword clove down, leaped back slinging scarlet spray. An axe swung upward and struck the shield almost from her grip. Her spurred boot raked the foeman's eyes, her blade thrust, and he entered Hell a blindman.

Had any man felt qualms at slaying a woman, they vanished before the fury of this hellion. Through their ranks she ravaged, guiding the warhorse with her knees, though the stallion seemed to think like a man. Weaving between the great trees, Gwellines galloped, leaving many a Selonari crushed beneath his hooves. Blows aimed at her were met by shield and blade, slipped past and answered with deadly speed. Her soldiers rallied to her, fought recklessly at her side, and when a man stopped a thrusting blade from her back, his slayer drew his last breath knowing the blaze of her wrath.

Into the forest they surged, where trees were giant pillars of this temple of war. And the sacrificial altars were glutted. It was a chaos, a desperate melee of man against man, a myriad of individual duels on

which the outcome of the battle hung, although in the turmoil, the maze of forest, there was no way to guess which army had the firmer grasp on victory.

Resting a moment as the battle swirled about her, Teres tried to gauge her army's status. It was a hopeless task at present. The steady pressure from the forest beyond was proof that Dribeck had brought up his main army in the night, though how many soldiers he held in reserve could not be known. Noticeably absent from the struggle thus far was any sign of the Selonari cavalry. Glancing back at the bridgehead, Teres saw that the Wolf's soldiers had cleared the planks and were trickling across the Macewen. As their advance drove the archers out of bowshot of the bridge--and their fire was nearly stilled already--Malchion's army would surge across. Then Dribeck could send in all his reserves, but with little hope of throwing back the invaders. Since this moment was his only real chance to crush their advance, Teres assumed he must already have brought up the greatest part of his army. Well, Selonari had not enough strength; they could only meet her vanguard on, at best, even terms. It remained for her to hold firm until Malchion's main force could cross to support them, then they'd chase Dribeck all the way to Selonari, where he'd be lucky if enough of his army survived to bar the gates.

She saw a horseman draw near--one of the few Dribeck had shown so far--and recognized Kane as the rider. The stranger loomed more massive in battle gear than in his priest's cloak. He fought like some elder god of war, it seemed, face twisted in malevolent laughter, eyes glowing blue fire, slaying her soldiers like infirm slaves. With surprise Teres noted that he carried no shield; instead he swung a heavy mace in his right hand, parrying, striking with it as if he had full use of both arms. Their eyes met for an instant, and even at this distance Teres felt stunned by their chill flame of death.

Kane wheeled his mount and turned to another portion of the field. Teres wondered about his reasons for continuing his masquerade--to preserve Dribeck's confidence, presumably, but after this battle the Selonari lord most likely would share his secrets with the ravens. Perhaps Kane had found no opportunity to desert, though he fought under Dribeck's standard as if he were that schemer's champion. It occurred to Teres that her own men might well slay Kane without ever learning he was the Wolf's agent. But that, she decided, was Kane's risk, and she wondered if such might not be a fortunate twist of fate.

But there was enemy blood to spill: She pushed Kane from her thoughts and spurred Gwellines forward to where her soldiers were falling back, scattering men of both armies before her charge.

From his own steed, Lord Dribeck viewed the weaving battle with concern. Crempra's archers had been broken by the Breim advance. He had pulled them back, but now wondered if he would be forced to commit them once again--although he had hoped to hold them for a better moment. Still, he had advanced almost his entire reserve, keeping back only his personal guard. If many more of Malchion's soldiers came across, he would have to use Crempra's archers for infantry, throw in his own guard as well, and try to force the invaders back to the river. It would mean the final cast of the dice for him, but unless his first strategy came through, and soon, this desperate move would be his only recourse.

Then the anxious eyes that searched the far shore widened in hope. Confusion caught up Malchion's right flank as it waited to cross the Macewen. Down the graveled flood plain wildly galloped a company of horsemen, steel blazing in the morning sunlight. A cavalry charge on Malchion's unprotected flank!

Above the roar of his men Dribeck waved his sword and shouted in exultation. "Ristkon's cavalry! We've done it! Now the Wolf will know he's thrust his leg into the jaws of a trap! He'll gnaw it off if he's to escape us! For Selonari, men! Our steel can spare his worn teeth the task! At these yellow-bearded reavers, now, and we'll show them how Selonari welcomes thieves!"

He threw the remainder of his force full into battle, boldly committing them to his strategy. For when the point of Malchion's crossing had been fixed, Dribeck had sent his entire cavalry under Ristkon's command to ford the Macewen at the closest shallow. It had been a gamble--a mad ride downstream, across the fording, then back upstream--with only a few stretches of roadway to speed their progress. His archers had delayed the Breim crossing for as long as could be done without alerting Malchion to their true strength. It had been close, but the first of the gamble was won. To capitalize on this strategy remained for him still, and his carefully set trap might well prove unequal to the monstrous beast its jaws held.

Intent only on crossing the river, Malchion was caught altogether off guard by the cavalry assault. Milling in confusion along the bank, his soldiers were staggered by Ristkon's charge. Men yelled and fell over one another, tumbled into the current, seeking only to escape the murderous hooves, the reddened blades. Chaos shambled along the shore. A wedge through rotted log, the Selonari cavalry split the Breim army as they drove to the bridge.

Malchion howled commands, but the panic-stricken confusion upon the shore made a barrier of the packed ranks, and the Wolf was helpless in his numbers. For all the disorder, his soldiers heavily outnumbered the enemy horsemen, and he knew he could bring down his heel to crush the Selonari into the river. But first his men must recover from the shock of the charge, and Ristkon had not meant his to be suicidal.

Even as the army of Breimen recoiled from their thrust, the Selonari cavalry slashed through to the bridge. There the Breim soldiers fell back in dismay, uncertain whether to face the enemy on one shore or the other. Ristkon's men rode determinedly forward, and the pontoon bridge became the unlikely field for a cavalry charge. Meanwhile Dribeck had moved up his archers once again under the advance of his reserve infantry. Arrows raked the near side of the bridge, driving back the Breim soldiers who attempted to retreat to their fellows' aid. Cut down by arrows, crushed by hooves more frightful than the blades of the riders, Malchion's soldiers were swept from the bridge. The Macewen seemed choked with limp or struggling bodies of men and horses.

The Wolf led his army in pursuit, enraged with sudden understanding of Dribeck's strategy. But his way was blocked. For as they retreated, the rearguard of cavalry held back their pursuers long enough to break open skins of oil which they had brought. In minutes the bridge was ablaze, while in other sections the Selonari smashed open the pontoons, slashed and pried at the lashings. The bridge seemed to disintegrate all at once. Freed of the pilings, large sections drifted away into the current, some sinking, others trailing smoke--one with several soldiers yet standing on its decking.

Malchion's army was divided, and the Wolf could only howl in anger. The Macewen was too deep to ford here. Men and riders who shed armor to swim across were picked off by the archers when they came within bowshot--those who were not swept away by the current. The fastest of Malchion's remaining cavalry could not reach the fording and ride back to the battleground until hours after the issue was decided. Even had there been more material readily on hand, it would take hours to rebuild the bridge. In despair Malchion sent men across in whatever rowboats he had available, but these were subject to murderous archery fire, and eventually the Selonari captured and destroyed them all.

There was nothing to do but stand powerless with a good third of his army, a helpless witness to the battle as it resolved on the far shore. It was a torment that drove more than a few to plunge into the river and vent their rage in futile exertion.

The forest floor became a raging, tumultuous battlefield, its carpet torn apart, spattered with dark wetness, strewn with death. The final dice had been thrown in the game of strategy. Now the mindless

demons of war ravaged amok throughout the field. The battle was joined in inchoate ferocity that only death could untangle. No retreat, no reserves--either in men or in fury.

And through the twisting dance of war, the earth-shaking din of combat, Teres coldly appraised her position. With the influx of Ristkon's cavalry and Dribeck's reserves, the Breim invaders were well outnumbered. Strafed by arrows as they milled across the flood plain, their advance to the forest was crushed back by Dribeck's fresh troops, and through their rear slashed the Selonari mounted horse. They were seized in a vice between forest and river, with Ristkon driving a wedge through their spine. Her army must brace its full strength to force open the vice, or be broken like a thief on the rack.

Down from the forest marched Dribeck with his personal guard. At his flank Crempra dashed about, exhorting his archers to waste not a shaft--nor leave a full quiver, when the conflict became too entangled to know friend from enemy, as soon it must. The Temple guard had fallen back to form a wall of steel about the archers, fending off the desperate rushes of the Breim army. In the midst of the invaders already, Kane and Ovstal still fought at the head of their companies. Ristkon could be seen, silvered mail gleaming as he rode, leading his cavalry across the Breim flank, where such of the Wolf's cavalry as survived made an attempt to group for countercharge. Two others of his captains were down, by Dribeck's counting, as had fallen Diab, commander of the Temple guard.

Swords and spears slashed at his flesh. The Breim soldiers fought grimly to break through Dribeck's picked personal guard as it ringed the Selonari lord. His death could swing the battle, and their attack became maniacal as the tide turned against Breimen. Dribeck met the attack of those who reached him with cool swordplay. He was not a born swordsman, nor had he the physical might to dominate in combat. But his lean frame was possessed of wiry strength and evasive swiftness, which hours of careful training had honed to make his sword arm respected. And though he was conscious of the double risk he took in joining this desperate battle, Dribeck knew his men expected his personal leadership. They would not follow a lord whose bravery or martial prowess was suspect, and Dribeck meant to die a leader--if death must take him--rather than dance his dismal days as the puppet ruler his predecessors had become.

A spear tore at his mail and fell back. Dribeck drove his blade through the wielder's face. Screaming, the soldier dropped to his knees, still clutching the spear, and blindly jabbed it at his horse's belly. Swinging from the saddle, Dribeck lopped off the man's arm and left him writhing on the ground, as another enemy leaped to stab him. Dribeck's sword caught the other's blade, then with a sudden lunge laid open his belly. He straightened in time to block another's sword with his shield, traded blows in rapid succession, then rode the assailant down.

So it went. The battle knotted tighter still, now hand to hand exclusively, as the invaders were driven from the forest and onto the flood plain. Ristkon had split the Breim army into unequal halves, and in a fierce drive had overwhelmed the last of the enemy horsemen. The smaller half of Breim warriors was being forced into the Macewen, where the invaders were cut apart in the churned mud of the riverbank. Many tried to cast off armor and weapons, to swim back across the treacherous current. Some escaped thus. The annihilation of this segment of Breim warriors took the heart from their fellows; those who could now sought to slip through the perimeter and escape into the forest, where the Selonari pursued them a short way.

Kane's horse fell, Dribeck saw, hamstringed by a dying footsoldier. The red-haired stranger somehow leaped clear of crumpling mount to land on his feet. Blood-mad Breim soldiers swarmed upon him, and Dribeck knew no ordinary warrior could live under that rush. But Kane had penetrated to the thick of the enemy's main body, and there was no hope of reaching him soon enough. Kane was a bear surrounded by hounds, and his sword and mace rose and slashed, striking with blurring speed and deadly

certainty. His attackers were hurled back by brute strength, ringing him with smashed and contorted corpses like a bulwark over which new assailants slipped and scrambled.

Then reddened blades and stark faces swirled about him, and Lord Dribeck could spare no further thought for Kane. Doggedly he fought. His guard were fewer now; the enemy were fewer still, but seemingly heedless of their lives in an effort to bring down the leader of their foe. His shield hacked and dented, the arm behind it numb from countless blows, Dribeck's sword arm ached with relentless exertion--the pain less endurable than the gashes and bruises inflicted upon him. He set his teeth, breathed with a shuddering, hiss and drew upon the last stores of endurance to keep blade and shield weaving. Slash, parry! Block, thrust! Where were his men?

The foemen fell back abruptly as a mounted warrior drove through them. A mace shattered helm and skull of one whose axe had all but torn away Dribeck's shield, then the other was at his side. Too exhausted for surprise, Dribeck recognized Kane, astride a horse he had somehow captured, his massive frame splattered with gore, but apparently little of it his own. Dribeck could not guess with what awesome carnage the man had fought through the Breim ranks.

With Kane came a number of Selonari soldiers--the battle too disordered now to distinguish one captain's company from another's. They threw back the Breim onslaught, giving Dribeck time to draw agonized breaths, wipe stinging sweat and filth from his eyes. The drive to slay the Selonari lord had been the last hope of Breimen's army. It had failed. Now Dribeck's soldiers were massed about him. The defenders' losses had been slighter, mainly because of the punishing toll of Crempira's archers, and the untenable position Dribeck's strategy had forced upon the intruders. The Selonari army was now in full control of the field; the battle's outcome was established.

Hopelessly outnumbered, a knot of nearly a hundred Breim warriors fought on. Teres had tried to maintain their advance into the forest. She and her men had been driven back last of all, forced onto the flood plain to discover further retreat was cut off. Dribeck held riverbank and forest edge; his soldiers surrounded them beyond escape. Nor was there any reasonable line of retreat, should they break through the trap--only the river, awash with hacked and drowned corpses, or the trees, where Dribeck's cavalry harried those few who sought to flee through the hostile forestland.

They formed a shield wall and waited for death to come, weary, bleeding limbs set for a last hopeless struggle. Already the Selonari army smashed and tore at their perimeter, merciless as starving wolves.

Amazingly, Lord Dribeck ordered his men to draw back. Still surrounded, the Breim soldiers accepted the respite to take fresh grips on their weapons and glare back at their slayers. But Dribeck was not minded to lose more of his warriors. The turn of battle had opened another avenue for him, and he sought quickly to follow on it.

"Lady Teres!" he called out to the disheveled girl astride a foam-streaked warhorse. "Your position is hopeless--any fool can see that! Order your men to drop their weapons and surrender to me!"

Teres tossed her head, ears still ringing from a blow that had dented her helmet. "Why surrender? Are your gutless jackals afraid to face Breim steel any longer? Then stand clear and give us passage to the river--and I'll order my warriors to spare your stumbling alley scum as we go!"

An angry murmur went through his men, and some edged forward. Sharply Dribeck ordered them back. "Save your bravado, Teres! You know your position! I'm giving you a chance for life! Be a fool, and you'll all die before the afternoon sun sinks an hour lower!"

"We'll die with swords in our hands, rather than stretched on Shenan's altars! Or slaughtered for the amusement of your craven nobility!" she shot back.

"You can't pretend to believe your own propaganda!" Dribeck growled. Human sacrifice had been officially banned for generations, though what the Temple might do in secrecy was beyond conjecture. "I offer you your lives on my, word! Before all my men, I swear that all who surrender now will be treated as prisoners honorably taken! You will be bartered to Malchion according to my terms; until then you will not be harmed. These are terms no army of aggression deserves, but I here declare this to be my command! Now decide quickly between life and death, for my archers grow tired of waiting!"

Gloomily Teres considered her predicament. Across the Macewen, cruelly in full view, stood the rest of the Breim army. They might stand across the Western Sea for all the help they could offer. At her side were the last of her men, a pitiful few. Most of her officers were slain; Lian perhaps had fled, since none saw where he fell. She called herself a warrior, and in the sagas Teres's heroes would have spat in Dribeck's face and died with sword swinging. It was the way a warrior died.

But sagas were for the night, when minstrels could weave heroic images from the shadows of the dead past. The day was beautiful, clear and bright with cool forest wind soothing her anguished brow. And Teres did not want to die.

There will be other battles to fight, perhaps, she told herself wearily. Then there was Kane--an enigma, but there was no question of his service to Malchion in the past.

"All right, damn you," she said huskily. "I surrender myself and my men to you--on the strength of your word, for what value it will prove. Gwellines is too good a warhorse to be feathered by Selonari arrows."

XII

Spoils of Victory

For two days after the battle the skies wept--the hammering rains that marked the close of the Southern Lands' short summer. In Selonari there was rejoicing--unbridled riot that made the Festival of the Spring Moon seem a pauper's wake in reflection.

Victory!

At least, for the moment. Shaken by the decimation of his army, Lord Malchion had withdrawn to

Breimen. He yet had better than a quarter of his army and the greater part of its supplies. But even allowing for Dribeck's losses, Malchion was outnumbered, and to cross the Macewen in the teeth of Selonari's warriors was to invite massacre. Injured, and feeling the loss of his daughter more keenly than he evidenced, the lame Wolf began the dismal return to Breimen. There he meant to rebuild his army before beginning a second offensive. Meanwhile, Breimen must be protected, in the event Dribeck should attempt to march north against the city, an ill-advised strategy Malchion rather hoped his enemy might be rash enough to try.

But now no one would cross the Macewen, for the river rose high on its banks, mercifully sweeping the flotsam of war to its delta on the Western Sea.

Through the rain Dribeck's triumphant army slogged back to Selonari. Wagons were heaped to overturning with the plunder of battle--stacks of war gear, litters of the wounded. They had worked through the night despoiling the field, tossing the dead of Breimen into the river, burying their comrades in great cairns. The wounded were cared for--even, by Dribeck's order, those of the enemy--although in a battle such as this a man's injuries were generally either mortal or not crippling. Patrols grew weary chasing down the few remaining Breim fugitives. When Malchion's retreat became certainty, the bulk of Dribeck's army returned to celebrate the victory.

Laden with glory and plunder, the Selonari soldiers all but fulfilled Malchion's threat to raze the city to the ground. To fight alongside Death is heady wine for those who evade his sword, so that life becomes a new bride, to be sported with in full before dawn dispels the magic of the first night. Toasts were drunk to the fallen, sweethearts consoled by the survivors. Grief might underlie the gaiety, might come tomorrow when the wine of victory became a sour taste. But on the night of their return, Selonari belonged to the victors, and they overflowed streets and taverns in total abandon.

Teres kept her face an aloof mask and drank a little wine. The banquet table before her overflowed with choice fare, but the ache in her belly could not be warmed by food. She and her men had been marched through Selonari's streets, displayed before a hooting populace alongside the rest of the victor's booty. Still, they had not been abused--other than the insults and offal the people had flung. Her men were imprisoned somewhere in Dribeck's dungeons; thus far he appeared scrupulous in keeping to his word.

Teres was given the dubious honor of attending Dribeck's victory feast. Stripped of her weapons and mail, she sat with back straight at the high table, conspicuous in her battle-stained hacon and pants among the richly dressed gentry. Darkly Teres pondered the wisdom of her surrender. If someone would be fool enough to place a knife just close enough, she'd snatch it up and bury it in Dribeck's pride-flushed throat. But the attendants on either side were vigilant--coldly solicitous, but guards nonetheless. Teres sipped her wine and consoled herself with the thought that Dribeck at least respected her nerve, did not dismiss her as some shrinking girl hostage, who was crushed into meek subjection by her captor's magnificence.

Damn it, this wasn't going to help her escape, though. Maybe she should choke down her pride and whimper a little... throw them off guard. No, she would not further degrade herself. Let the greasy fools guzzle and boast to their sallow whores of their bravery! Dribeck would soon grow overconfident; then let him learn what fury he thought to hold captive!

Teres wondered again how she might speak with Kane without arousing suspicion. The hulking stranger was deep in his wine, seemingly--a brooding figure amidst the laughter and loud voices. Dribeck had spoken low to a court wench, who slipped to Kane's side, but found her wanton advances distractedly answered. Teres wished he might give her some sort of sign, some indication that he meant to help her. Terribly alone as she was in the citadel of her enemy, this enigmatic figure was the only friend she had.

For the most part, Teres was ignored by the others at the high table--Dribeck's captains, the more important gentry, their women, and a lady of haughty beauty she learned was Gerwein, high priestess of Shenan. Conversation was in the clipped language of the Southern Lands, of its dark-haired people who had settled here before the Wollendan migrations. Teres understood it well enough to follow their speech, if she were so inclined, but their main topic was painful for her. Dribeck's several efforts to engage her--he spoke fluent Wollendan--she coolly rebuffed. So despite their curious glances, her captors were content to grant her the dignity of silence. Probably they regarded her as only another of the battle trophies on display for their celebration.

One pair of eyes stared at her in open hostility. Ristkon, Malchion's old enemy, murderer of her kinsmen, traitor to Breimen in the past--and doubly so today. No more than a small girl during Ristkon's conspiracy to seize Breimen, she remembered his smiling face well. A gash through the left cheek had scarred badly, drawing that side of his mouth into a mirthless grin. He had been a vain youth, with a face as pretty as a girl's and a tall body of pantherish grace; the disfigurement had twisted more than his smile. After his defeat, he was thought to have fled the Southern Lands and sailed north beyond Malchion's wrath. Dribeck had evidently unearthed him in some ill-famed port along the northern coasts. Contemptuous, Teres considered it a measure of Selonari cunning that its lord would stoop to recruit such filth.

As the evening progressed Ristkon's glare grew bolder, returning to her more often. He had addressed her in taunting words a few times, insults she pretended not to hear. To his companions he spoke now and again in low tones--words that brought snickers and guffaws, turned speculative eyes toward her. Teres deliberately looked elsewhere, though her ears strained to catch his whispers.

"Teres," he called loudly after one outburst of private laughter, 'all these years I've heard tales of wild Teres, the Wolf's sharp-fanged whelp. Last time I saw you, you were just a skinny little brat, who liked to thrash the page boys and crawl around the tables on feast days like a hound looking for scraps. So I couldn't know then, and now that I see you again, I still can't be sure. I mean, your face is homely as a sergeant's, and you're husky enough to command a press gang, and by all reports you've never been seen in anything approaching decent dress for a woman. So I'm puzzled, and I hope you'll tell me--are you really a girl who doesn't know her sex, or just some beardless freak of a boy?'"

Teres looked him in the face and curled her lip in unvoiced contempt. Her sneer mimicked the twisted set of Ristkon's features. The table began to grow quiet.

Riskon flushed, making a pale streak of his scar. "Well, I have to know for certain, Teres," he said in strained civility. "You know there's a blood feud between our lines. Now, if you're a man, honor demands we settle the feud at swordpoint. But if it's true you're a girl, why, I can't kill a girl. So I'll be content to take you to my chambers and treat you as I would any woman who's taken as spoils of victory."

Teres' knuckles tightened around the wine cup. "I didn't realize you made such a distinction, Ristkon," she replied in a tone that carried. "It's common knowledge that you're an accomplished murderer of women and children. I assume your ambiguous honor is equally confused about whom you take to bed."

Conversation was silent. Laughter at the other tables seemed miles distant. Ristkon's crooked smile was ghastly against his taut features. Slowly he rose to his feet, hands grasping the table edge as if anchored there.

"Take that mule-faced bitch to my chambers!" he choked. "I'll know if there's a woman under all that dirt

and leather!"

"Ristkon, I am lord here," Dribeck interceded. "I gave my word no harm would be done to the prisoners." The other seemed to bite off his first answer. He resumed his seat stiffly and quickly read the faces of his tablemates. "I don't plan to do anything to this bitch a woman wasn't made to take," he said with a malicious laugh. "Don't know why you're showing such courtesy to an enemy, though--you know how gentle the Wolf and his whelp meant to be with all of us! And I shouldn't need to remind you it was my cavalry that turned the battle to your advantage--else you'd know the Wolf's mercy firsthand. Teres is spoils of war same as any captured wench, and I'd think my part in the victory should give me booty of my own choosing. At least, I don't know of any reasonable lord who'd begrudge his captain a little sport after his invaluable service... unless he was more generous with a captured enemy whore than his own comrades."

Dribeck frowned. Many of the others showed agreement with Ristkon's point of view--nor was his argument unreasonable. He had plans of his own, however, that he dared not jeopardize. Neither did he care to lose face before his men, which seemed unavoidable whether he granted or refused his captain's demand. The sword was sharp and had no hilt; either Ristkon's will was stronger than his word, or he was niggardly in rewarding his followers.

There seemed an escape from the dilemma. Quickly, then. "I'm not forgetting your role in our victory," he answered smoothly. "But a captain shouldn't forget that his lord takes first share of the plunder. As it happens, I'm minded to bed my enemy's daughter myself. There are sweeter wenches and more willing, but it amuses me to humble this snarling she-wolf. Choose another for your sport, Ristkon, and be assured I'll reward your loyalty with more pleasing booty than this.

"Put her in my chambers for now." He gave orders to her guards, who led Teres away. She gave him a scornful glance in passing, ignoring the rest of the grinning throng.

Ristkon's derisive laughter followed her. "But you'll let us know what you find out, won't you! Maybe you'll want to muzzle the she-wolf--her bite is probably as venomous as her growl!"

The Wollendan renegade seemed appeased, Dribeck decided. Evidently he judged the humiliation sufficient revenge for the moment. More to Dribeck's concern, his handling of the matter had found favor among his men. It was a great joke, and suited the drunken merriment of the night. Tomorrow or the next day, the incident would have dimmed to nothing more than an amusing anecdote, and he could proceed with his new plans untroubled by consequences of the evening.

In another wing of the citadel, Teres restlessly paced about the chamber. Two capable-looking maidservants kept nervous watch over her, more to keep her from locking the door than anything else, since Dribeck's chambers were situated within the castle's topmost level, and far, far below his windows Selonari's brick streets blazed with festive light. A pair of guards waited beyond the door. Teres was not inclined to leap from the window like a fool; she meant to show Dribeck her claws first, should he come to carry out his boast.

Grimly she cast about her prison. A strong rope or the equivalent might let her escape through the window, but it seemed doubtful Dribeck would keep such on hand. The guards had already removed several weapons. It was possible others had been missed, and if she could lay hands on something without being seen... But the two women watched her closely.

The chambers were interesting, had her mind been less troubled. Appointments were rich, though short of opulent. There was a virile tone to the furnishings that created a casual, comfortable presence. One

alcove was a small study, shelves stuffed with charts and books. She glanced at the maps, particularly the one depicting the Southern Lands, but found nothing of military significance marked there. The books were meaningless, except for one whose title she spelled out haltingly to be a history of the Wollendan clans. Her reading was confined largely to military reports, and she deemed that anything else of value could be read aloud by clerks. So Dribeck was the scholar that men said. Grudgingly she admitted that the man was not unskilled in more important matters, as well--she had seen some of his fighting ability. The bed--her eyes kept returning to it despite her resolve--was a great curtained affair, its mattress draped with fine fur robes.

Short of ransacking the various chests and closets, there seemed no chance of turning up a weapon. She doubted her wardens would permit such rifling. One cabinet was strewn with delicate items of feminine toiletry, apparel, jewelry. "Pentri's--milord's, mistress," explained one of the maids, at her quizzical expression. She shrugged. Such finery she had chosen to shun. A mirror lay upturned, and absently Teres noted that her face was dirty. To give her hands something to do, she found a lavabo and washed herself. It was not so bad a face.

A murmur at the door, and Dribeck entered, waving the maids to stand outside. He approached her with a trace of hesitation in his stride.

"So... has the lord of Selonari found courage to 'humble this snarling she-wolf'?" Teres taunted, forcing her voice to calmness as she measured the distance between them. "Drunken oafs have pawed at me on occasion. Some of them were lucky enough to find comfortable positions later--fat custodians in some foreign emperor's harem. Or shall I swoon for the fierce-hearted warrior... the strutting victor whose word is not worth the breath that utters it!"

To her surprise, Dribeck sank onto a chair and frowned at her in annoyance. "Damn it, if I wanted to wrestle with an acid-tongued virago, I'd chase after Gerwein. She doesn't wear spurs to bed... so far as I know. I told you you wouldn't be harmed, and my pledge stands! I could easily have given you to Ristkon--saved myself a difficult moment. Well, I didn't, and as far as I care, you can sleep here the night without my presence. Tomorrow, when things are smoothed over, you can go to the quarters I'd planned for you--not a dungeon cell, either. Hell, did you think I felt some overpowering sexual attraction for you? Ristkon just wanted you out of some black malice, and I interfered with no thought but to spare you from his twisted revenge.'

"Well, you pick your servants!" Teres retorted, wondering if this was a ruse to put her off guard. Somewhere she found spirit to resent his curt rebuff--an emotion which seemed illogical even to her. "Let me say that the thought of sharing a bed with you was only slightly less distasteful to me than the prospect of that traitor's embrace. And the surest way to demonstrate the sanctity of your word is to get your ass out of here right now. Your Pentri must be moaning for you this very moment."

Dribeck started, a ghost of a smile on his lips. "Pentri? Hmmm. The gossip in Breimen is stale. I've grown tired of the minx. She's down the hall with Kane, probably. My moody friend seemed unhappy without the immediate prospect of battle, so I sent Pentri to him to ease his melancholy."

"He needn't mope for long. There'll be another battle, and soon! Did you really think Malchion would give up this war, just because your trickery dealt us a temporary reversal? Before the snows come, your victory celebration will seem a sour mockery!"

Dribeck drew his fingers together before his face, cradled chin on thumbs, elbows on knees. "Perhaps not," he commented, dropping his hands. "That's what I hope to discuss with you. There is no point in continuing this war, really. Your defeat must have convinced you of what a mistake your invasion was.

(Let me finish!) Breimen lost the best part of its army.

You can bankrupt your treasury, arm every farmboy and alley rat, try to cross the Macewen again, and there'll be another bloody defeat for you. All right... say by chance you were victorious after your best effort has already failed. Selonari wouldn't fall easily. You'd be left with a decimated population, a bankrupt government, mercenaries running riot through your land, and your great prize would be a burned-over city-state. That's the best you'd come out; all odds are you'd never make it across the Macewen!

"Why do it? Breimen doesn't need Selonari's wealth, or our lands. Maybe the Wollendan tradition is to seize land as you desire, but you should damn well realize by now that Selonari isn't some backwater settlement you can march right over, like your countrymen overran the northern towns some years back. If you feel the need to expand your holdings--a dubious necessity--then move east. There's nothing but miles of timber between Breimen's borders and the slopes of the Great Ocalidads. Selonari has no interest in seizing Breimen's lands. If that were true, my army would be at your gates this night. What logic, then, in continuing the war?"

"War is seldom logical, I'm told," Teres returned. "My people's honor is at stake, for one thing... though I doubt you would understand the idea of honor. And Selonari's hostility toward Breimen is well proven. We know you mean to consolidate your control of this degenerate court by invading Breimen. Why else did you so carefully assassinate two of our leaders before we even thought to invade Selonari in our defense!"

"Your army had been marshaled for months! And I swear to you these so-called assassinations were done utterly without the knowledge or complicity of Selonari!"

But our spies tell a different story, she thought, smiling that she had a certain defense for his too persuasive arguments. "Well, now I know how good your word is," she replied ambiguously.

Dribeck frowned at her. "Well, you think about it for a while. You'll have the time. I've tried to act in good faith with you, whether your suspicious mind will let you recognize that or not. And if you're wondering about your fate, let me say I intend to return you and the other prisoners to Breimen, and I hope to do this as a gesture of faith that will include a treaty of peace."

"So you can hatch further schemes, no doubt."

He slid to his feet. "I won't waste the night arguing with a deaf mind. You think about it, though--might not corrupt your spirit to do that. Sleep on it. The two girls will see to your needs."

Dribeck looked back at the door. "It's really an interesting face, when it's clean enough to see your skin," he concluded.

Teres swore at his back. The maidservants stole back inside. Basic male tactic. Sweep a woman off her feet with flattery, then she'll believe every word you say. Some women might. And the next man to call her face "interesting" would die horribly.

XIII

She-Wolf's Fangs

After Dribeck's departure, Teres tired of prowling about the room. Throwing back the curtains, she stretched out across his bed, boots dug into the furs, her back arched against piled cushions. Little had she slept, despite the racking fatigue of these last days of nightmare. For all the exhaustion that gnawed at her, her nerves were too tightly strung, her position too uncertain to permit her to relax. Besides, this night of mad celebration might offer as good a chance to escape as she would ever be given.

She drew her knees together, clasping her hands about them to raise her back from the pillows. One of the two maidservants slumped down upon a couch; the other sat upright in a chair--taking first watch, Teres noted. Baiting her maids was one of her favorite amusements.

With unblinking stare, Teres gazed into the other girl's eyes. The other returned her gaze curiously a moment, then dropped her eyes in alarm. Teres continued to watch her face. The maid fidgeted with her garments and cast about the room for something to occupy her thoughts. Every few minutes she raised her eyes again, found Teres still watching her, and nervously looked away. At length she set her lips and boldly stared back, seeking to end the game. Teres held her eyes for a space, then pursed her mouth to form a kiss. Flushing, the servant girl glanced away, looked helplessly toward her companion, whose soft breathing indicated she slept.

"Come lie beside me, where you'll be comfortable," Teres whispered. "There's no need to pass the night stiff as a guardsman at his post." The girl colored and muttered something in vexation, too soft for Teres to hear. Anxiously she rose to search the room for something to take her thoughts from the prisoner. Teres smiled mischievously and began to hum disjointedly a scurrilous ballad popular among the troops, freely translating bits of verse to suit her spirit.

Challenge sounded in the hall. Men's voices drifted through the door. Someone protested about orders. Another voice explained that they were to finish their watch, give them a chance to share in the victory celebration. Teres, listening with interest, decided from the muffled sounds that her guard had just changed. To her memory, there were only two soldiers posted in the hallway, but with a fresh pair her chances of slipping past probably edged a hair closer to nil.

Stealthy footsteps approached; voices mumbled at the doorway. Feeling a thrill of alarm, Teres ceased her teasing and rose to her feet. The door rattled and swung suddenly open. Her breath caught.

Three men hastily entered. A pair of tough-looking mercenaries--and Ristkon, twisted smile as malevolent as the coiled whip on his shoulder.

His henchmen showed knives. "Not a sound!" he hissed warning to the startled maidservants. "Cry out, and my men will carve a smile across your throats!" He turned hot eyes on Teresa.

Quickly his men bound and gagged the terrified maids. Dumping the girls in a closet, they reluctantly quitted the room.

Deliberately Ristkon placed his sword and dagger beside the doorway, well out of reach of the captive. Serpentine as the uncoiling whip, he stalked across the chamber toward her. "I said I meant to learn what manner of freak the Wolf's pup might be," he grinned. "And I've known a whip to turn many a bitch's snarl to a whimper."

"Hadn't you better get your stooges to bind me for you first?" Teres spat. "It's out of your reputation to take such personal risks!"

The whip licked lazily toward her boots. "You'll see that my lash cuts as sharp as your tongue," he warned unruffled. "Before long you'll whine and grovel like a well-mannered bitch should for her master."

"Dribeck will deal harshly with a minion who transgresses his lord's pledge!" she promised hopefully. Biting down a wave of panic, she backed toward the bed.

Ristkon laughed in derision. "What can Dribeck do? My men have replaced his guards. My noble lord and his brainless cousin have stepped into the night to clank mugs with his soldiers--to win their love, so he thinks. The others here are all besotted with drink and carousal. There's none to give a thought to you, and when you'll soon moan for me, your cries will be swallowed up in the night's riot. If tomorrow Dribeck finds his pampered prize somewhat less haughty, what can he say to his most valued captain? The fool has enough cunning to know he needs my horsemen in this war! Do you think he'll scruple at a captive's well-being to quarrel with his most powerful ally? He'll laugh and shrug it off, as if it had been his plan from the start!"

He strode closer, face livid with hate. "Do you know this weakling means to make peace with your father? After he promised me governorship of Breimen for my support of his cause! Well, I was driven like a dog from that city, and I'll return like a conqueror! And the Wolf and his vainglorious line are going to whimper on their bellies before my feet!"

The whip snaked out, to curl about her waist. Its lash did not cut through the iron-bossed leather jerkin, though her breath stuttered at its force. Laughing, Ristkon yanked back on the whip, spinning her as its coils unwound. "Will you climb out of your man's leathers, she-wolf? Or shall I peel it from your flanks!"

Again the whip struck for her. She threw up her arms to guard her face, felt the bed press against her calves. Fury fought terror; wildly she tried to think. Ristkon stepped closer, drew back on the lash. Staggering, Teres let herself be pulled forward to his grasp.

His smile somehow leered wider. He crushed her to his chest, still grasping the whip's haft. She felt his heart pounding, his breath in her flair. "Lost your fight this easily, have you?"

She clasped her hands around his back. No trace of flab had the years implanted to flaw his dancer's body. "A lord usually needs no such weapon to shed a lady's clothes," she murmured unsteadily, not daring to meet his face.

"A wanton so soon?" he rasped, and pressed his lips against hers, his vanity flattered by her swift capitulation. She closed her eyes, hesitantly returning his harsh kiss. "My bitch has sheathed her claws... or more likely dreams of trickery! Do you fear my whip now? You've had but a taste."

"No man has ever mastered me," Teres whispered. "The fastenings, are on the back." She snuggled against him. The coils dropped from her waist.

The wine of Ristkon's breath made her dizzy. There was smug mastery in his sneering face. "Perhaps there is a woman inside these jabbing tits of iron," he muttered hoarsely, fumbling with the fastenings of her jerkin. "We'll soon both know. Serve me well, wench. If you please me, perhaps you'll face the morning without your ribs shining through your back."

The hacton carne loose down the nape of her neck. Docilely she raised her arms and let him tug the garment over her head. Underneath, she wore only a thin shirt, clinging to her flesh with chill sweat. "Not a boy, after all," observed Ristkon thickly. He ran his thin fingers across her firm breasts, trying to cup them, but she threw her arms around his neck, embracing him tightly. The whip dropped to the floor, atop her cast-off jerkin. Roughly Ristkon tugged out her shirt and slipped his hands beneath the garment. She sighed huskily in his ear, feeling his throbbing neck pulse.

The cloth he drew off, and as he stared at her boldly, she loosened the ties of his shirt. "Stand back a pace," he warned. She complied meekly, as he quickly yanked his shirt over his head, suspiciously alert that she make no move while the cloth briefly blinded his vision.

Leaning against the bed pillar seductively, Teres worked her boots free. "Am I so displeasing to your eyes?" she whispered. Ristkon made an impatient gesture. Her fingers dug at the clasp of her pants. Watching his face with half-lidded eyes, she slid the leather trousers off her slim hips, wriggled them down her thighs, stepped out of them as they crumpled onto the floor.

Wearing only a brief undergarment, Teres swayed across the room. Ristkon's eyes branded her, but she held her smile. He tried to embrace her, but she laughed and touched his belt. Her fingers tickled his tight belly, then broke open the clasp. With a sudden wrench, she jerked his pants down to his knees. "Your boots," she breathed heavily.

Impatiently Ristkon fumbled with his clothing. "Stand away!" he mumbled, struggling with boots and trousers in haste.

Instead Teres drew back half a step. She hooked her fingers into the waist of her undergarment, and began to roll the thin cloth down her hips. Ristkon watched greedily as the furrow of her belly was bared. He bent forward clumsily, in an awkward half squat, as he blindly tore at the restraining trousers, bunched stubbornly over his boots.

Not daring to think of consequences, Teres shot her knee up. It slammed full into his outthrust face, smashing broken teeth into flesh.

With a choked cry--too startled to express his pain and rage!--Ristkon snapped backward, legs entrapped in his clothing. He fell heavily on his back, head striking the floor. Before he could recover from the stunning impact, Teres leapt upon him.

She snatched up the whip--there was no time to reach Ristkon's sword. A crimson spray whooshed from his ruined lips, as she drove her knees into his chest. The lash she twisted about his throat to choke off his angry bellow.

He twisted desperately, striving to throw her clear. But Teres had resilient strength in her willowy frame, and she was trained in the subtleties of hand-to-hand combat. She grimly fought for her hold, every spark of shame and rage strengthening her strangling grip.

The whip bit deep into his splotched throat as she mercilessly twisted the garroting coil. Her knees pinned Ristkon's shoulders, but his legs lashed wildly, still ensnared in his clothing. This muffled the drumming of his heels, and presently their staccato pounding ceased.

Her hands shook as she at length relaxed their grip on the whip. She contemplated the purpled face a moment and felt loathing shudder through her. As she rose to her feet, the room wavered somewhat, though her thoughts worked in cool clarity.

Their struggle had been silent. If any sounds had reached past the door, Ristkon's guards must have assumed their leader was at play. Perhaps she could bar the door...

Then what? Dribeck's reaction to the death of his captain might be anything. At best, she would merely remain his prisoner. Slumping upon the bed, she gnawed a favorite knuckle as she thought over her situation. Ristkon's interference had completely altered her status. Fake guards waited beyond the door, Ristkon's weapons lay before her, her wardens were bound and helpless. The entire city had gone mad this night, and by Ristkon's words the citadel was abandoned to drunken revelers. Her chances would never be better--if she could get past Ristkon's henchmen alive.

A plan began to take form. Risky, but she grew weary of being Dribeck's victory prize. Some disguise might serve her in this.

Quickly she stepped to the cabinet where Pentri's effects lay scattered and rifled through them intently. If the Selonari knew her only as a rough-featured youth in stained battle gear, perhaps she should change her costume. Unfortunately, Pentri had left little here in the way of substantial clothing, and Teres dared not loose one of the maids and borrow her garments. Any second, any hint of suspicion, and someone might open the door to investigate.

With rapid movements she sponged the sweat and grit from her body, noting the red welts the lash had raised, the half-healed scratches and bruises of combat. Well, on this night no one would notice. She found a halter and loin belt that fitted loosely on her slim figure--extravagant affairs of silver wire and flame-tinted silk that made her feel like a tavern dancer. A green silk negligee, trimmed with fur, was as close to street clothing as Pentri had left. She slipped it over her shoulders, then frowned at her reflection. Not warrior's garb, at any rate.

Her hair was the most dangerous point, but there seemed little she could do about that. At least she had noticed a few blonde women among the dark haired Selonari. The heavy braid she rapidly unbound, to brush the long tresses smooth and arrange them under a jeweled headband. One half of her face, where the scar crossed her cheek, she let her hair spill over. Not too many would recognize her face, unless they caught the broken nose and looked more closely. A touch of color to her lips... It might work.

She would soon know. Wiping her palms, Teres drew Ristkon's sword and held it back in the folds of her gown. Coolly she swung the door ajar.

"It's an orgy. Come join in," she invited the soldier who confronted her.

She stood in shadow, the blade hidden behind her. The negligee hung open all down the front. It was an alluring invitation.

In a second the soldier would stop to think. But at the unexpected appearance of a seductive girl, he reacted automatically, without suspicion of danger. A smile starting to crease his features, he stepped

through the doorway toward the girl. His hands reached for her.

Not giving him a second to reflect, Teres lunged with the sword. Its tip thrust through his heart, and the guard crumpled with a hoarse groan.

There were two guards. The other had stood on the side away from the half-opened door. He appeared in the doorway, even as Teres yanked back her blade to let his companion topple dying to the floor.

"What the hell!" he blurted. "What the hell!" His eyes took in the two corpses, the vengeful siren. For a stunned second he hesitated, his sword slowly rising, his throat contracting to shout alarm. Teres's blade struck savagely. His head half flew from his shoulders as he fell across the doorway.

Treading over the prostrate forms, she stepped into the hallway warily, and thus evaded the rush of the third guard. The mercenary had waited down the hall, to waylay Dribeck with some feigned dilemma should he return prematurely. Their swords met with a clang that should have alarmed the entire citadel.

Desperately Teres parried his blade, then slashed at his face. The soldier deflected her sword and retreated in confusion. Teres anticipated his cry for help and snarled as his mouth opened, "Sound the alarm, and how will Dribeck reward your part in Ristkon's insubordination? You knew your lord's orders--Dribeck will hang you, once he learns of Ristkon's treachery!"

"Reckon he won't learn!" grunted the mercenary. "You just sealed your death, bitch! Don't need no help to gut a woman!" He lunged forward.

Hampered by the billowing negligee, Teres barely eluded his thrust. The unfamiliar garments tangled about her, restricted her movements. And how long could this continue before someone heard the clash of steel? Recklessly she advanced, driving the guard back a few steps. His blade tugged at a fold of silk, as it sought her bare flash.

The guard staggered, arched his back in pain. By reflex as his swordpoint wavered, Teres ran him through, although the mercenary was already dying from the dirk protruding from his back. As he fell on his face, Teres gazed in wonder at the embedded knife-hilt.

"Pretty," remarked Kane, striding forward on bare feet. "Oh, very pretty indeed. What more have you done?"

Roughly he grasped the guard's body and dragged it into Dribeck's chambers. With raised brow he glanced over the carnage. "Damn! It has been a full night for you! Let's keep this unnoticed while we can. I'll mop up the blood in the hallway; you pour some wine over the smear, and maybe no one will look closer. You can get some wine, can't you?"

"Where did you come from?" Teres queried, bringing the wine.

"My room is in this wing, too--thank your fiery god that no one else is about right now! I meant to check on you, if chance presented... Ristkon left the banquet in too composed a mood. So I was wondering how to see you, when I smelled blood, stepped into the hallway and discovered you running amok. There seemed no point in prolonging the duel, so my knife found his back. Save us a swallow of that, will you? Quick now, to my room! Discovery here would be unfortunate."

"Where's Pentri?" Teres asked uneasily, noting the livid scratches across Kane's bare back. She carried her clothes and Ristkon's weapons balled in her arms.

"Get inside. You keep well informed, Teres. Pentri's asleep on my bed, with a smile on her hungry lips. I drugged her wine, and she'll frolic through her dreams for hours yet. She'll think the wine overcame her, and tomorrow she'll swear with all the fervor of her vanity that we two sported the night away. By the way, that's an impressive outfit. Now what the hell happened back there?"

Briefly Teres sketched an account of the evening. "Kane, you've got to help me escape!" she finished. "Dribeck said he'd be gone for the night, but new guards--someone is certain to wonder why the door is unguarded. They'll look inside, and Dribeck will turn the castle upside down searching for me!"

"I think I can get you out of here," Kane mused. "Short notice, but we seem to be committed now--and as you point out, discipline is at a nadir tonight. And it's certain your life is in danger until you cross into Breim lands."

"What about Dribeck's talk of peace?"

"More of his cunning. His losses at the river were greater than he admits. He knows Malchion can rebuild his army faster than Selonari can... and that the Wolf's next march south won't be so rashly conceived. So he hopes to stall for time--build up his army under pretense of truce. While Breimen is lulled, he means to attack your city without warning, solidifying his position here with this retaliatory invasion, using Breimen's spoils to reward his followers."

"I suspected his treachery myself," Teres swore bitterly. "I'll need a good horse to flee the city. But you're in danger, too! Will you come with me?"

Kane shook his head. "Unless I ruin it tonight, my position here is secure. I saved Dribeck's life in the battle, fought gallantly to win the day--so he believes. Tell Malchion that I'll stay at Dribeck's side, pass on what information I can, and trust that the Wolf's generosity is more boundless than his enemy's."

"But on horseback you're sure to encounter Selonari patrols--Dribeck hasn't left his frontier unguarded in the dizziness of his victory, don't forget. Once he learns you've escaped, he's sure to put a watch all along the border. There's a less dangerous way, I think. Look, how well do you know the geography of the Southern Lands?"

"As well as any commander of troops should!" the question rankled Teres.

"All right, then. As you know, the Neltoben River flows through Selonari, continues west and joins with the Macewen--maybe twenty miles upstream of where the Clasten River flows down from Breimen to empty into the Macewen. The river's high from the rains, but not too dangerous to navigate. Say we steal a small boat, put you aboard... with the fast current you'll be far past Selonari's walls by dawn, and with the rain nobody's going to notice who's on the river. You just drift with the current--the only fork is where the Neltoben's South Branch flows into Kranor-Rill, but that's only a mud-choked creek, so you won't confuse it. Follow into the Macewen, down to where the Clasten runs in. Then you'll know you're out of Selonari lands. Beach the boat, and there's a settlement there where you can commandeer a horse, then ride north along the Clasten to Breimen."

"Sounds good. How do I get out of here, though?" Kane regarded her thoughtfully. "Rely on the camouflage you've already chosen. You don't look like the infamous Teres in that silk affair. I'll carry you, keep your face and that blond hair hidden behind my cloak. If anyone meets us, I'll explain that you're Pentri, and I'm going to revive you with some fresh air. No one's thinking too clearly tonight, and semi-clad girls aren't worth remarking on in this revelry. Outside, it's raining too hard to notice anything."

"And we've wasted time enough to be out of here already." Shoving feet into boots, Kane threw a cape over his bare shoulders, belted his sword to his waist. Taking some coins and a joint of meat from Kane, Teres wrapped them in a bundle with her own clothes and weapons. Kane added a flask of wine and examined the package critically. "Your boots, too?" he grimaced. "Try to keep that under my cloak. If anyone notices, I'd rather not try to explain this one."

He swept her up, letting his cape fold over to cover her head and shoulders, while her legs were bared by the other side, making it obvious that his burden was a private matter. Burying her face low against Kane's shoulder beneath the cloak, Teres supported her by hooking the scabbard tip into his belt and pillowed her head against the leather. So positioned, she felt Kane open the door and stride boldly down the hallway.

Teres's temperament was suited to direct action; this subterfuge tormented her overwrought nerves. It took all her endurance to lie limp in Kane's arms, her eyes blind to what was taking place about her, her imagination tantalized by the distant sounds that drifted through the darkness. I will be calm, she ordered herself, taking comfort from the sword beneath her head. If they were challenged, she and Kane could kill a hundred of the drunken fools before they fell.

There was a measure of security in the massive strength of the man; it seemed strangely comforting to feel the broad bands of muscle ripple beneath her cheek. Reddish hair bristled across his torso and limbs, his frame and features almost bestial in their rugged savagery. Yet the stranger was no apish barbarian; there was a sense of ruthless intelligence; his speech, his manner bore the stamp of civilization, of a man who sought both knowledge and power. She wondered to what limits.

Kane bore her effortlessly, although it was no delicate-limbed girl he cradled in his arms. There was unhurried confidence in his stride, and Teres vowed that her nerve would not prove of inferior temper.

Dribeck's citadel was somewhat grander than her father's keep, and to her unseeing mind its corridors were interminable. A few voices babbled in the darkness, and Kane grunted an occasional response. No one seemed to challenge them, or even to pay much attention. Well, why should anyone accost a man of Kane's position--ask his business--when it plainly was private? Logic explained; heedless, her emotions painted disaster in vivid colors. What if some meddling party of drunkards happened to...

Wind stirred the russet folds, dampness clinging to its breath. An indistinct question from close at hand. Kane's voice rumbled against her cheek. his tongue thick with drink. "Too faint for a real orgy, these genteel wenches. Little cold rain in her face will wake her up--or I'll find something livelier in the taverns." A mixed response of knowing chuckles, sympathetic exclamations, advice to try the Prancing Mare for sights to quiver a well-bred lady's thighs. "Take the place apart!" muttered Kane, moving past.

Rain splashed against her bare legs, rattled, upon Kane's cloak and blotted out sound as well as sight. Teres released her clenched teeth, relief washing over her like the rain. They had escaped the citadel.

Kane walked on a ways, then set her down. Peering about, she discovered they stood in an alley. The night was foggy; a cold drizzle fell patiently. Indistinct figures stumbled through the murk, intent on reaching warm shelter or oblivious of their state altogether.

"Walk from here," Kane muttered. "For a well-turned armful, you're solid as a wrestler. I understand how Ristkon lost the match."

Teres declined to comment, uncertain whether to consider this a compliment or not. "Now what?" she

asked instead.

"Walk beside me to the river. See about finding a boat. Here, get under this." He drew her to his side, covering her with his cape. "No one's going to give a second glance to a couple of revelers trying to stay dry."

It was a snug fit--Teres was nearly as tall as Kane. He enclosed her with his right arm, drew her close to his broad chest, and pulled a fold of the cloak over both their heads. Clutching her pack in front of her, she contrived to jab him with the sword scabbard as they walked.

Water spread in wide puddles along the brick streets, cool beneath her bare feet, splashed over her legs as they waded through the night. Kane kept to the shadows, though the sizzling streetlights, the yellow-streaked windows and smoky doorways spilled ineffectual light into the street. As Kane had predicted, no attention was wasted on them by the few others abroad in the gloom. Rapidly they stole through the rejoicing city, pausing only once to strip a cloak from a senseless drunk.

Beyond the raucous uproar of the taverns, the riverfront was deserted. The river gate stood open, its guards drunk and gaming in the shelter of their barracks. Stragglers sloshed past unnoticed, bound to sample the pleasures found within Selonari's walls or in the rougher dens that spotted the waterfront and outlying fringe of the city. Stealthily they drifted along the quay, avoiding these few centers of clamoring merriment.

"Looks good," concluded Kane, pointing to an overturned rowboat beached along the shore. "Won't need bailing, either." The boat was about eighteen feet in length, with lifting bow and wide stern, an undistinguished riverboat showing signs of disrepair. Fresh gouges in the mud indicated it had been in regular use--presumably seaworthy, then. Battered oars were shipped underneath, and its bowchain was anchored to a tree. There was a dwelling nearby, but the owners were off in a tavern somewhere tonight, and no lights shone.

Kane busied himself with the lock, picking skillfully with a sliver of metal drawn from his boot. In a moment the chain was loose. Overturning the boat, he grasped the stern and raised it easily. "You want to catch the bow so she doesn't grate on the stones?" he suggested. Teres strained her back to the task and lifted the bow clear of the mud while Kane carried the vessel to the water's edge. The launching had been done in silence.

"All right, you know your course. Don't hit a snag in the dark, is all," he warned her. "Keep to the current, and you'll reach the fork of the Clasten and the Macewen by noon or so. Use the oars if your shoulders can stand it--steer with the tiller be better, probably. Going to be light in a few hours, so you can see the drift."

Teres murmured acknowledgment as she tossed in her bundle and stepped over the bow. Kane handed her the stolen cloak. "This will keep you warm. Let me have that negligee. People saw me walk out with a girl in my arms; they'll see me return the same way. I'll find some tavern wench and carry her back with me--she'll never figure it out, when she wakes up in Dribeck's castle."

Handing him the garment, Teres covered herself with the cloak and dropped down beside the tiller. "You're taking the biggest risk now, Kane," she advised. "Ristkon's body may have been discovered already... Pentri found drugged in your room instead of abroad with you. You could walk right back into a trap."

"I've thought of that," Kane admitted. "Well, for these stakes I'll chance it. Good luck."

"Good luck to you," she replied. Her smile was concerned. "Kane, thanks for what you've done."

He shrugged, muttered something indistinct. With a shove, he sent the boat out into the current. For a moment she saw him gazing after her, then darkness engulfed them both.

XIV

Flight into Nightmare

The rain was cold, the mist from the river colder. Teres huddled under the clammy folds of the cape, limbs pressed together for warmth. The cloak was soaked through, but kept the rain off; underneath she wore only the brief halter and loin belt, and through the thin silk, the filigree, chains and beads were chill against her flesh. She considered her packet of clothing, but left it under the bowpiece where it could stay dry. She could not get any wetter, at least, and should the boat capsize, she could swim better like this.

Through the night the river bore her along. In the darkness it was impossible to judge her speed, but the boat seemed to hurtle through the rain. Logs and bits of drift bobbed past, pulled from the shore as the Neltoben climbed along its banks. At first, Teres's heart caught each time a chunk of flotsam nudged against the boat. But their course and speed were about the same, and presently she ignored the other passengers upon the flood current. Occasionally she drifted near enough to discern the blacker shadow of the riverbank, and quickly she would steer the boat back into the middle of the stream. A few snags reached out, but these were rare, for the river had risen several feet, and the racing current swirled her craft past such obstructions.

A monotonous drizzle, the rain continued to fall. Dawn was drawing near, though, for the skies were tinged with gray. The shoreline became a dark wall, dreamily floating past her boat, and the mist grew thicker, whiter with the approach of light. At present there seemed little to do to man the rowboat; the river appeared willing to carry her back to her land without effort on her part. It was not even raining heavily enough now to bail.

Wearily Teres slumped across the stern. Her hair was wringing wet and made a clammy pillow as she stretched trying to make herself comfortable. The patter of rain and the mumble of the river were soothing, hypnotic. When had she last slept? An eternity ago, it seemed. The ordeal of the last few days left her exhausted, drained of strength physically and emotionally. How pleasant it was to lie here, alone with the river and the rain and the coming dawn.

Teres slept.

Dreams came to her, flowing like the river. Troubled scenes of battle, shiny blades flashing for her. She fought frantically, her movements slow, clumsy. She hacked at onrushing assailants whose bodies showed no wound, who kept coming toward her even as she slashed and chopped their unyielding flesh. Swords stabbed into her, tore her skin. She seemed to feel the pain, moaned and twisted as she lay, unable to waken fully.

Faces drifted past her consciousness, flotsam on the current. Familiar ones whose names she knew, anonymous faces who had swirled before her eyes in the fury of combat. Malchion--always taunting, laughing at her as he encouraged her. Ristkon--his face ghastly purple, twisted smile leering. His whip struck her face, scarred her cheek. His hands clutched, scratched, turned to spiders that crawled over her flesh. Dribeck, proud and disdainful--never drawing a breath until his cunning told him how to act to best advantage. His words so convincing, his heart black with lies. Kane--his face hidden by a mask. Mysterious. Always present when fate seemed poised to turn, other times a phantom. His actions always readily explained. Behind the mask... what motives, what secret laughter?

The strange ring he wore. Its sinister jewel glowed before her mind's eye, impossibly large, intolerably brilliant, unthinkable evil. It shone through his mask, its malevolent gleam supplanting the blue murderlust that smouldered under his brow. Terror intense, now, the nightmare touching her with insane fear. The bloodstone was enormous, immense as the sun. Kane disappeared within its depths. Its evil luster engulfed her, tore at her mind as she fought insensately, sucked at her soul with vampiric lust. There were other things dimly visible in its hellish luminance... writhing figures human, humanoid, utterly alien. They were slaves of the bloodstone, their souls feeding its fire through eternal agony. The gem was alive, sentient! Its aura was creeping across the land, sweeping the entire Earth into its pulsating flames. It saw her now, wanted her, reached out its glowing tendrils for her. Its touch, probed her brain!

She screamed then and shot upright, almost capsizing the boat. Her mouth tasted of fear. Sick and shuddering, she sat hunched against the stem, groggily recollecting her thoughts as fire racked her cramped muscles. Light. The sun was high. The rain had ceased; the mist still hung. She was on the river.

She was not on the river.

In lost confusion, Teres looked about her. The rowboat no longer shot along the current; the riverbank did not rise against the sky. Instead her craft drifted listlessly through a tepid mire, and all about her rose a chaotic wilderness of slime-laden mud and vine-strangled trees.

Kane's warning! The darkness, her slumber! When the Neltoben River had risen in flood, its mud-choked South Branch had once more flowed with rushing water. While she slept, the boat had been caught in this deviant current.

She had drifted into Kranor-Rill!

Bleakly she recalled the dark tales of this unwholesome morass... the deadly creatures who crawled through its labyrinth, the treacherous stretches of unseen quicksand, its ruined city, said to have been built in the Earth's lost dawn, and the fearsome Rillyti, who conducted certain abominable rites with captured humans in the fastness of the swamp. She shivered; the late morning sun seemed cheerless through the swamp mist.

No time to panic now, she told herself, still shaken by the horror of her dream. Teres shrugged off the cloak, tied back her straggly hair, found blood on her face where a low-trailing limb had slapped her.

Bright Ommem, how far into Kranor-Rill had the boat drifted?

Far indeed, it appeared. Little current stirred her craft. Looking around, she saw only a maze of bayous leading away... leading who knew where? The rising water had covered most of the mud flats; cypress knees were flush with the surface; sycamore thickets were wreathed with floating slime at their bases. She might have drifted in from a myriad possible avenues.

Stoically Teres shipped oars and pulled back against the scum-flecked water. So long as she rowed against the current, her course must be directed out of the swamp. Unfortunately, the current here had grown so tenuous that she could not be certain of its direction, or even of its existence.

Her fatigue scarcely diminished by her troubled sleep, Teres's back and shoulders quickly grew tight with ache. It was a heavy boat for one not accustomed to rowing. Still, there was great danger here, and she forced her protesting frame to row, to row, to row.

One bayou proved to be a cut-de-sac, and she cursed bitterly as she retraced her course. Softened from the rain, her hands began to chafe and blister at the oars. With strips of silk torn from her loin belt she bound the oar handles, which helped somewhat.

Then the bow rammed against some submerged obstruction, jarring the boat. Startled, her wide eyes gazed intently at the planks, relieved that no snag had burst through. But the rowboat appeared hung against something--how? She had not rammed another mud bar surely.

Despite her nerve, Teres screamed when the webbed hands slapped over the side of the boat. Like sorcery--conjured demons, the Rillyti rose from the murky depths of the swamp. How many? Ten, fifteen... what matter? They surrounded her boat, paddled in scum-trailing circles about her, climbed from behind tangles of cypress roots, slid from dank thickets along mud flats.

The rowboat rocked violently. Teres dropped the oars and leaped for her sword, lying just beneath the bowseat. A sudden tilt all but capsized the boat, threw her dizzily against the bottom. She scrambled to her knees, nearly falling overboard as the boat lurched again.

A webbed hand shot over the side and clamped about her arm. Teres snarled in animal loathing, pounded at the imprisoning grip, sank her teeth into its foul scaly hide. The hand only tightened, scraping into her flesh with its rough claws. The rowboat tilted heavily, would have overturned had not webbed hands held it steady. With a wet flop, a Rillyti clambered over the stern, its bulging eyes hideous as they glared at her.

Teres went mad, tore at the clawed fingers that pinioned her, nearly disjointed her shoulder, as she sought desperately to stretch out for the sword. It waited just inches from her straining fingers. The other batrachian reached for her now. Her bare foot kicked out savagely. Clawing, biting like an animal she fought back. Against its armored hide her fists were useless. Another crawled into the boat and pinned her arms. Only the steady hold of the Rillyti clustered about them kept the rowboat from capsizing a hundred times.

Tired of her struggling, the Rillyti cuffed her, almost breaking her jaw. Teres went limp, stunned almost senseless by the blow that clouded her mind with starbursts of pain, filled her mouth with the taste of blood. With thongs of leather the monsters bound her wrists and ankles, the knots clumsy but sound. Leaving her slumped across the bottom of the boat, they leaped over the side again.

As the fog in her thoughts cleared, Teres felt the vessel moving. The Rillyti were towing the boat into the

depths of Kranor-Rill.

For a while Teres lay there, too sick with horror- to move. Her thoughts--spinning dizzily, drugged from fatigue and terror--painted gibbering images of stark fear. They had not killed her outright; the creatures had bound her like a trussed lamb. Vividly the whispered legends of Kranor-Rill screamed through her mind. The loathsome rites the Rillyti performed on captured humans, the nameless god of elder-world evil to whom they sacrificed on moonless nights. She recalled the dark tales of their raids upon isolated frontier settlements, of the depraved bestiality that tainted their treatment of those whose misfortune was not to be slaughtered outright, of the unspeakable atrocities the mutilated corpses bore witness to, the hideous ravings of those mindless wretches who lived to mew and giggle at their belated rescuers. In dread, Teres remembered that the moon was waning these last few nights, and her sanity all but fled as she thought about the manner of her death.

This was not the way the she-wolf died, cowering on her belly in abject fear. The unyielding steel of Teres's will shivered at the blows of demon panic, but would not snap under its awesome pressure. Though it almost strangled her, she choked down the bleating scream that once released would never stop. She called herself warrior, not trembling court lady; if this was to be her dismal fate, Teres meant to die true to the identity she had chosen.

She lifted her head, forced her eyes to see what lay about her, drove the frightened images from her mind. Her sword. The monsters had paid no attention to her pack. It still lay under the bow, the bundle of clothing, provisions... and her sword.

Teres twisted about. She sat hunched in the stern; the sword was several feet away. Perhaps she could reach it, stealthily ease it from its scabbard, cut her bonds. There was no hope of escaping the Rillyti, she understood that. But with sword in hand she would shower the swamp with their blood. She would fight until they were forced to kill her... die a clean death with her blade reeking with her enemies' gore.

But first she must reach the sword. Carefully she shifted her position. Her captors swam alongside the rowboat, clutching its sides; this kept her movements within the boat hidden from them. Slowly Teres drew her knees under her and pushed forward across the bottom. Heart thundering in her breast, she waited motionlessly, praying her activity had not aroused suspicion.

She wriggled forward another foot to reach the midship seat. Surely the Rillyti could sense her shifting weight--how long before they investigated? Pressing against the bottom, she writhed underneath the seat overhead. Her wrists were tied behind her back, so that she must slide her weight along the battered boards. Grit and splinters of wood abraded her bare flesh, the needling pain unnoticed in the tearing agony of suspense. She crawled from under the seat. Halfway there... what would happen when her weight tilted the bow into the water?

Inch by painful inch, Teres edged toward the bow, crawling a little, then resting to lull the monsters' curiosity. She could almost touch the sword now... and here was the most dangerous point. The pack had been jammed well up under the bowseat to stay dry, and with her hands bound behind her back, Teres would have to sit against the bow and reach up under the seat. This would raise her head in view of the Rillyti; it was daring too much to hope it would not draw attention.

Perhaps she could pull the sword to her. Cautiously Teres twisted around on her hips and stretched her feet toward the bow. She hunched closer. Her toes drew under the bowseat and touched the bundle. Another inch farther. She could feel the leather pack against her feet now. Her ankles were tightly bound, but she could hook a toe under the belt that circled the bundle.

She pulled her feet back, trying to lift the pack from the deck. The sword scraped against the hull. Teres sank her teeth into her lip, waited for a bufanoid face to peer over the side. Nothing. Could the creatures not have seen her sword when they captured her? She raised her ankles and drew back again, trying to keep the sword from clanking. Its scabbard hung crosswise against the bowstruts, jammed. Sweat stung her eyes. Carefully she shoved the pack back under the bow, rotated her ankles to free the scabbard, pulled it toward her once more. The scabbard came free of the strut; the bundle moved out into the open. Teres flexed her knees and drew her ankles to her hips.

A sudden splashing. Amphibian shoulders and trunks emerged from the water. They were passing over a shallow bar. Hostile faces glanced down at her, saw the sword only inches from her grasp.

She lunged for the hilt, but never had a chance. Cruel hands lifted her from the bow and dragged her roughly to the stern. The sword lay where she had dropped it. Ignoring the pain as protruding boards bruised her bare flesh, Teres stared at the fallen weapon in hopeless yearning. One of them threw a leather noose over her head, snugged it against her throat, and tied the loose end around the tiller. The booming croaks assailed her--angry, derisive--but she was too shaken to notice.

The day and the boat dragged on. Teres slumped against the stern, numb in spirit and body. The sword had been her last hope; now she could only expect death on some unhallowed altar, or an even more grisly fate. At least, no man would stand by to watch her passing--perhaps this unknown death would be a fitting climax for the legend she had worked to create. Poets and warriors of coming ages could speculate--whatever became of Teres, the she-wolf of Breimen? This was trifling consolation to her, but every other thought her mind turned to led only to cringing madness.

The sun was sinking now, but she was dimly aware of its course. Under its wan warmth, her leather bonds dried and tightened, bit into her flesh. There was water slopping along the bottom, and she splashed it over the thongs when the pain aroused her from her stupor. Once she thought about soaking the hide strips, so that they might stretch and grow slack. But the leather had been wet before it was tied and would stretch no farther; after a while she abandoned the attempt.

Once there sounded a bellow of pain, followed by tremendous thrashing. Teres looked up to see one of her captors struggling in the writhing coils of an enormous serpent whose jaws were embedded in the amphibian's shoulder. Other Rillyti closed in, their golden swords hacking at the reptile, so that it was half severed in a number of places. Spewing dark blood, the serpent at last released its victim and slithered beneath the surface, where its contortions boiled the scum to foam. The stricken Rillyti floated listlessly, legs kicking in rough spasms. A pair of the creatures dragged its body behind them as they resumed their progress. Teres hoped the snake's wounds had not been mortal.

Hours passed in monotonous misery. Somehow the Rillyti found a path through the rotting maze. A few times they had to drag the rowboat across mud bars, but generally they simply carried it in tow. There was a wide circuit made at another point, where Teres observed a limitless morass of quicksand, too treacherous for even the swamp creatures to dare.

Through the tangle of vegetation, she caught glimpses of higher ground now and again. Its shadowy outline persisted, until at length she could discern an island rising from the swamp. In places now she thought she sighted a great wall of rubrous stone looming over the trees. Her mind worked in detached speculation. Perhaps she would walk the legendary streets of lost Arellarti before she died.

The hull scraped against stone, nudged into a moss-carpeted quay. Clambering from the water, the Rillyti moored the rowboat against the overgrown quay and ascended the steep bank of the island. One of them unceremoniously slung Teres across its shoulder and followed the others.

Twisting her head, she secured an inverted view as she jolted up the bank and onto a stone causeway. Hundreds of the Rillyti were milling about, hurrying to examine the captive. Their bass cries echoed from the walls--dull bellows, hoarse croaks, rasping hisses--plainly intelligible communication to their pit-like ears. From their numbers, they must have made this ruined city their encampment.

Ruined city? Teres stared about in amazement, her mind slipping off its shroud of despair. The legends of the existence of this lost prehuman city were true. But it was more than the wonder of these cyclopean walls of unknown stone, the precise and alien geometry of its radial streets and windowless buildings, the monstrous creatures who shambled through this masterwork of eons-dead genius--it was not this alone that made her breath catch in astonishment. For Arellarti was not the dead ruin legend had pictured.

Arellarti was in a state of reconstruction. Everywhere she passed, there was evidence of full-scale restoration. The streets were cleared of debris. No strangling encroachment of swamp growth remained--although traces of Kranor-Rill's invasion could be seen in bits of vine that clung like lost streamers in the cracks of the walls, or the phantom trails of suckers etched to the stones where once they climbed. Drying fragments of brush yet littered the streets in places, fugitive scraps from the enormous mounds which had been dragged away.

And the city was being rebuilt. Rillyti labored busily to erase the scars of time. Huge blocks of the strange stone were being hoisted atop the wall; broken obelisks rose again; jagged rifts were smoothed, filled in. Scaffolding was thrown up around many of the buildings, where cracked and slanting edifices were being dismantled, new stones laid to heal the decay. Where the scouring elements had effaced the bizarre engravings of the walls, crumbled away certain peculiar carvings and ornamentation, hulking workers were restoring the original patterns with meticulous attention. An entire army of swamp creatures worked with single-minded zeal to undo the corrosive marks of millennia. Arellarti was emerging from its long death, shedding grave-mold and cobweb as it rose from its swamp-buried tomb.

But the marvel of this reawakening titan of elder Earth could not dispel the horror of her plight. Teres sensed the colossal presence before she was able to see it, stretched helpless across her captor's shoulder as she was. Its shadow fell over them--shadows were filling all of Arellarti now, as the sun slunk away. Across the central courtyard they bore her, down an incline, and into the enclosure of a vast dome.

Teres caught shaken glimpses of the gigantic walls which soared away to darkness far above, of a limitless space encircled within--columns of bizarre design, gleaming banks of stone, crystal and metal, sinister coils of unfamiliar alloys. A fantastic structure of unimaginable complexity. It had the aura of a temple to some dark and nameless god.

The Rillyti laid her on the altar then--an altar it must be, for now she saw the god. A hemisphere of bloodstone, huge as the heavens, brooded in the center of this prehuman dome. She stared into it in dread fascination, struggling only weakly when they cut her bonds, tied her spread-eagled to the oddly positioned bars which protruded from the crescent altar, whose stone carried stains of frightful significance.

The bloodstone was alive.

In terror Teres remembered her nightmare, knew that her subconscious mind had felt the evil influence of this sentient crystal, as she drifted into its poisoned realm. Perhaps the bloodstone, sensing her intrusion, had dispatched its servants to bring her to its temple. She writhed against her bonds, mechanically, without hope of freeing herself. The altar's curious knobs and protrusions jammed into her back, making

her wonder at its outré design.

The crystal was alive with energy. A green luminance made its depths translucent for an impossible distance; scarlet flame pulsed through its veined markings. The entire dome was lit by the crystal's evil glow, and vibrant energy seemed to radiate unseen through its lustrous tentacles of multihued metals, hummed and throbbed through the looming columns of machinery. Like the monstrous eye of some cyclopean god, the bloodstone glared from its setting, considering its shambling worshippers and the horrified sacrifice tied to its altar. From what alien dimension, in what benighted age, she wondered, had come this crystal of malevolent energy to this world?

Crowds of Rillyti were gathering in the shadows. Turning her gaze from the bloodstone, Teres saw the figure approach her--a robed batrachian of imposing stature. His fingers were closed upon a knife of white metal, and it threw back the wavering glow of the bloodstone as he stood over her.

The priest, for such he must be, began a roaring chant. Like an obscene chorus, the assembled Rillyti responded to his invocation, croaked a rhythmic litany that echoed ceaselessly across the dome. Teres heard their gibbering chant only dimly; all her attention was held by the glinting knife as it rose and fell, wavered about her pinioned form. The blade seemed to hover now over her belly, as the invocation rose in crescendo. Breathing a final prayer to Ommem--though in truth her god seemed to have forgotten her--Teres set her teeth, steeled her muscles, watched the flickering knife carve ritual passes through the air above her flesh. This was going to be worse than her imagination had pictured.

The chant trailed off abruptly. Teres closed her eyes, expecting the knife to descend. It did not, during the time of the breath she unconsciously held, and she opened her eyes to see what new depravity she must face. The priest had stepped back, so she stole another breath, one she had never thought to draw. The knife was lowered--at his side, not in her belly. The Rillyti appeared to cringe in fear.

Crackling light brushed her face, and Teres risked a glance away from the knife to follow the eyes of the worshippers. In the air above the bloodstone a creature of fire was taking shape.

God or demon? Teres wondered, unable to guess what meant the awed response of the Rillyti. It was a humanoid shape, she observed, dancing like witch's fire over the apex of the living crystal. A man of light, of energy, of the coruscant life force that glowed within the bloodstone. Smoothly its outlines coalesced, a man of emerald and ruby-veined energy, a silhouette in three dimensions.

As its flickering outlines grew less blurred, the vibrant energy cooled and solidified. The figure floated from above the bloodstone, glided down its smooth sides, came to rest before the altar. The Rillyti were slinking away into the night, even as the shimmering film of energy drew away from the figure like a mask, revealing the man who had formed from the crystal's alien force. But Teres had already found the silhouette familiar to her eyes; recognized the substance of this crystal that was not bloodstone, though it resembled that gem; remembered well where she had seen such a crystal before. And so it came as no sudden shock to Teres that the man who stood before her was the stranger called Kane.

Lord of Bloodstone

Kane's eyes swept over the awestricken Rillyti, his manner domineering, commanding. Some voiceless communication seemed to pass between man and batrachian, and Teres sensed the silent anger that drove the creatures back into the night, resentful but subdued.

"What are you, Kane... man or demon?" Teres exclaimed.

Kane considered her thoughtfully for a moment, vexation mingled with indecision in his frown. "I've been called both," he answered distractedly, "though both races have damned me often enough. And I claim neither--although once men called me brother. With time you can decide in your own mind; for now it's enough that the Rillyti obey me."

His knife cut her bonds. Teres groaned and slid from the altar, massaged her wrists and ankles. There were angry bruises where she had lain against the protruding bars.

"This isn't an altar, of course," muttered Kane abstractly, watching her ministrations. "It's a control dais for Bloodstone. The Rillyti have declined into pitiful degeneracy since the days of Arellarti's building, and their superstitious rites have replaced whatever knowledge they may once have had of Bloodstone. I had forbidden these pointless sacrifices--it's a testament to Krelran engineering that the controls weren't completely jammed after centuries of such abuse. Still, old ways die hard, as they say. You were too tempting a victim for them to waste, which is some measure of the toads' degeneracy, I suppose, when you consider the evolutionary gulf between Rillyti and mankind.

"Teres, you present a complication to me just now. Still, there are ways I can turn this twist of fate to my advantage. I assume you must have blundered into the Neltoben's South Branch--I should have allowed for the river's rise. But then, you told me you were certain of your geography."

Her legs shook, but she turned on him angrily. "It seems, Kane, that your schemes are far more subtle than those of the ambitious adventurer I first judged you! There's a sorcery here, and it appears I'm only a pawn in some diabolical mystery... and that I had the bad grace to upset some phase of your conspiracy. But what devil's game do you play, Kane? By what wizardry did you materialize from the bloodstone's rays? And since I doubt it was accident that you came when you did, why did you cheat your minions of their sport? A little water would have cleaned things afterwards, and you wouldn't have caused their resentment!"

"Toads obey me, or they die. I couldn't care less for their affection. As to my presence, I see what Bloodstone sees, and Bloodstone sees all within Arellarti." He paused, then added: "I intervened because... because your death was useless to me... perhaps because you interest me. My game--as well you name it--is an adventure whose goals you will soon understand. You err in accusing me of sorcery, but then the true nature of my power so defies human comprehension that men will call it magic.

"To ease your mind, though, I plan you no malice. Naturally, you will remain in Arellarti until my plans

achieve a certain stage; after that...? Well, you'll no longer be in a position to upset my strategy, so you can decide for yourself. Meanwhile, I've commanded the Rillyti not to harm you--so long as you don't try to go beyond Arellarti's walls. I think you know what will happen then. And you would be wise to shun the presence of Bloodstone, for reasons that you probably are aware of."

Teres looked at him bitterly, hating Kane for his treachery, but unable to forget the debt she owed him. His words grew fuzzy; his figure blurred. She swayed dizzily, then caught herself against the control dais. Her strength was virtually burned out from this endless ordeal.

"Can you walk?" Kane asked with a shadow of concern. "I'll take you to where you can rest."

"I can walk... damn better than crawling serpents who steal the shape of men!" she snarled, but did not deny her fatigue.

Kane grinned. "Sure you can. Come with me, then--and if you fall, I'll let you sleep where you lie."

The days that followed had an unreal quality about them, like some fantastic dream from which she could not awaken. Dreamlike, certain moments were impressed upon her mind with indelible clarity, while other times. Teres scarcely could recall what had transpired an hour earlier. Kane told her she had fallen prey to some fever, and he gave her strange, bitter powders to take, though these seemed only to cloud her thoughts further. To her own mind, it was more the alien evil of this elder-world city that twisted her thoughts, filled her head with 'bizarre images.

It was late afternoon when Teres awoke from a lengthy and mercifully dreamless sleep. She lay quiet for a moment, her eyes still shut, and felt the stones beneath her bed of furs. When she opened her eyes, she knew where she was, although the evening before she had fallen onto the rough bed without a glance at her surroundings. Extreme exhaustion had triumphed over her tormented nerves, and she had lapsed into a deep slumber almost instantly.

The room must be Kane's, she decided, since he was evidently the only human in Arellarti. Its furnishings were primitive, aside from a few curious relics he must have gathered from the ruins for study. It was reassuring to find her pack from the boat resting near her, and after cursory ablution Teres discarded her begrimed harem costume and drew on her familiar garments. The sword, of course, was not included, but she partook of the wine and meat she had packed several worlds ago.

Feeling her devil-may-care mood return--after all, what more could happen to her?--she tentatively pushed at the door of the chamber. It swung open readily enough, and she peered into the hallway, where a pair of Rillyti returned her gaze. Their manner was not hostile. Time to test Kane's word, she decided, stepping into the hall.

At her emergence, the guards gestured for Teres to follow. She complied nonchalantly, finishing the braid of her hair with an air of disregard for her surroundings. They descended a steep flight of spiral stairs--the ones, she recalled, whose odd-spaced steps had occasioned some difficulty last evening. Kane had chosen a tower for his lair in Arellarti, and she later recognized that a proclivity for heights was characteristic of him.

Kane knelt inside the dome, intent on a series of engraved bronze alloy plates he had laid out adjacent to

one of the glowing columns. He looked up to greet her, his manner casual in the midst of this ancient city of alien sorcery. "Teres... awake finally!" He smiled, noting her change of garments. "Should I say you look like a new man?"

Her smile was venomous. "Some thief made off with my sword."

"I haven't enough toads for you to wreak havoc among them. Besides, you'll be protected from any predators that might creep past the walls." Ignoring her retort, he dismissed the guards. "I think you'll be interested in touring Arellarti. After all, aside from myself, you're one of the few humans ever to set foot within this city of toads. I believe the others never had time for reflection on Krelran architecture."

He reached for her arm, but Teres turned away. Shrugging, Kane stepped on ahead, the girl matching his stride. As they walked through the city, Kane told her something of Arellarti's history, his own connections with its mystery, his reasons for his undertaking--speaking at times guardedly, others exuberantly--like a lord extolling some newly conquered domain. Teres listened in silence for the most part, not able to draw him out on points he chose to leave a sinister veil upon. Despite her unease, her anger, she found herself fascinated by his narrative, and by the uncanny grandeur of Arellarti.

He paused alongside the towering obelisks, where Arellarti's ponderous bronze portals--recast in the shrieking furnaces of the city--were being levered onto ancient hinges. This vantage provided an overview of the lost city, so that Teres could gaze in wonder upon the spider-web geometry of Arellarti. Clearly evident was the frenzied reconstruction throughout the circular metropolis, work which she learned continued through the night, lighted by brilliant torches whose flames were fed by the energy of Bloodstone. Teres adopted Kane's habit of addressing the alien crystal by proper name, "Bloodstone," for he assured her the gemstone was a sentient creature, an entity of godlike power.

Below them she could see the tireless Rillyti laboring over tasks which ranged from the hoisting of mammoth blocks of stone to the painstaking reengraving of a delicately carved helix or volute. In the gathering twilight the serpentine flickering brilliance of Arellarti's furnaces stone an eerie light along the streets. Nourished by the crystal's awesome energies, the furnace gave birth in travails of incandescent fury to the unknown alloys and the obsidian-like stone that raised Arellarti from millennia of decay. Raw materials came from salvaged debris and heaps of varicoloured mud the batrachians dug from the swamp.

"Strange that these uncouth slime-dwellers can perform such organized and intricate labor," mused Kane. "Hard to realize that a race of the magnificence the Krelran must have attained in that lost age could have degenerated into these misshapen toads. I wonder how mankind would fare, should some cosmic disaster blast our civilization into forgotten rubble. Perhaps we would return to the trees and caves of our bestial ancestors--skulking apemen that a mad creator's folly transformed into men--and not even legend would remember the dead majesty of our race."

"How can the Rillyti carry out this project, and why do they bother?" Teres wanted to know. "From what you say, they must have lived content in their primitive villages--until you unleashed this slumbering evil!"

"Arellarti was their home of old," Kane replied. "Now they rebuild it. Bloodstone is their god; they obey its commands. They are nothing more than slaves to the crystal--an army of working bodies whose brain is Bloodstone. They worship it, and like a true god Bloodstone controls its servants to accomplish its private goals. Bloodstone commands; toads carry out its will. I doubt they have any freedom to disregard its telepathic directives. Well, once they controlled Bloodstone; now they serve. Another measure of how far their race has declined. Now I am Master of Bloodstone, and through my servant, the Rillyti are my

slaves as well."

Teres laughed scornfully. "Are you truly lord of Bloodstone, Kane? By what power do you claim fealty? How can any human believe himself master of this demon whose powers you call godlike--to any sane mind it is a force of cosmic evil!"

He glowered, angered at her insinuations more than he meant to show. Teres laughed inwardly, amused that she had broken his annoying attitude of detached calm. "By this ring I am Master of Bloodstone!" Kane emphatically proclaimed. He clenched his fist to brandish the sinister jewel.

She glanced at the ring with unconcern. "I have seen ragged fools who swore they wielded vast powers of sorcery within the sigils they wore on dirty fingers," she scoffed. "And I know of a few such talismans which did have some degree of magical potency. But your boast defies physical law, since you state Bloodstone is not the work of sorcery. How can a tiny chip of gemstone make you lord of a crystal monolith whose powers come from beyond the stars?"

"Size is not a factor even in physical law," snorted Kane. "A spark can burn a city, a wheel can move a boulder, a sliver of iron can kill a dragon. Don't presume to suggest laws for alien science.

"There is much that even I don't understand about Bloodstone. There are gaps in my knowledge--considerable gaps, I'll grant you--which are lost within mystery beyond my understanding. Sometimes Bloodstone's wisdom has no equivalent in human comprehension; other times I know the crystal guards its thoughts and memories from my perception.

"My link to Bloodstone is of a symbiotic nature. I can draw upon Bloodstone's power, but without me--or more accurately, without the master of this ring--Bloodstone is only a lifeless crystal. For reasons that I cannot altogether comprehend, Bloodstone's life force is a combination of two sources. Somehow it feeds upon the cosmic flow of energy that holds our universe in balance--in space as well as dimension. But it also requires the power of organic life, which it obtains by..."

He faltered, coughed as if to clear his throat, and began on another thought. "So the bond between Bloodstone and the wearer of this ring is all-important. The ring itself is only a convenient method to maintain physical contact; the crystal in the ring is the vital factor. Both Bloodstone and the gemstone of the ring are hemispherical. Though it seems to defy your 'physical law,' the two crystals are equal halves of the single organism. The crystal in the dome draws upon forces. Of cosmic energy; the crystal in this ring transmits organic life force. The two forces--the two halves--make up the sentient entity that is Bloodstone. My mind and that of Bloodstone are linked through this chain, and we draw power through one another."

"Then you are slave to this twofold vampire!" sneered Teres.

"No!" Kane exploded, and she thought he would strike her. "No! Our minds are separate, independent! I cannot penetrate Bloodstone's thoughts beyond its secret veils, nor can Bloodstone rule my will like a sorceror's hypnotic spell! My mind is my own, and I am master of our pact! And this is not only because I am indispensable to its existence. The Krelran, who created--or at least harnessed--Bloodstone, built external controls into the crystal entity. That 'altar,' where my toad friends were about to make sacrifice last night, is a master control for the entire crystal. He who knows the nature of Bloodstone can manipulate the projections on that dais, and so control the energy within the crystal. To the Krelran, Bloodstone was only a machine, a complex and powerful machine, and no machine can be self-controlled. If I desired, I could shut off Bloodstone's energy... leave it the dormant crystal it was when I found it!"

He caught the look in her eyes and added pointedly, "Needless to say, the control dais is not without certain devices to shield it from ignorant tampering or wanton destruction. Should Bloodstone be impelled, it could annihilate the author of such hostile intent, were he not protected by this ring."

"The crystal would have lain dormant then, until Kranor-Rill at last swallowed these forgotten ruins!" Teres exclaimed in wonder. "What madness drove you to awaken this relic of elder-world evil!"

Kane answered with a sarcastic laugh. "You call it evil? Bloodstone exists beyond human concepts of good and evil. The alien crystal is a focus of cosmic energy; as such, Bloodstone is the key to power beyond human comprehension. I mean to unlock that power, to use it for my own purposes. In that ambition I am no more a 'master of evil' than any other conqueror--who is always a devil to his enemies, a god to his followers."

"Who will follow you, Kane?" There was loathing in her tone.

His voice remained confident. "A strong man will follow a strong leader. When the power of Bloodstone reaches across the Southern Lands, there will be many who will make a victorious cause their own. It is far better to join a conqueror's army than be trampled under his march! And my power will not halt along the coasts of the Southern Lands!"

"Impressive schemes for a lone adventurer who hides among his toads in a rotting domain!" she retorted with deadly scorn. "A man who is twice traitor dreams to rule a continent!"

Her taunts stung him. Kane's manner grew less reserved. "I only bide my time here! Bloodstone now has only the smallest fraction of its potential power. My slaves are at work repairing the damage of centuries, but that will only restore its power to its ancient level! Arellarti was never completed by the Krelran--their enemies destroyed them before the city could be finished. Had their work been perfected, and had not the ancient Master of Bloodstone in some manner inactivated the crystal (or so I find hints in Bloodstone's guarded thoughts), Arellarti could never have fallen, even under the devastating weapons of elder Earth!

"I mean to complete this venture of lost eons-to bring Bloodstone to the peak of its power! Today I am vulnerable, I freely admit it. Were my purpose discovered, a concerted attack could defeat me. But such a united effort will never occur. My neighboring states are at war. They will continue to waste their strength, until my initial foray will overwhelm them easily... unsuspecting and exhausted by their petty battles! I intend to establish the foundation for my empire here in the Southern Lands, and I'll find loyal subjects among the survivors. And soon no man will dare to proclaim himself my enemy. For once Arellarti has been completed to its projected design, the power of Bloodstone will be the power of the cosmos! There isn't an army, a city, a force known to man that can stop me then!"

"Others have made that boast!" Teres snapped.

His eyes were a chilling glow. "Yes, and some of them founded empires that yet stand!"

The night her sleep was poisoned by strange and unwholesome dreams, and when Teres broke from her fitful slumber she found the nightmarish spell yet held her. Phantom shapes leered at her in the darkness,

slowly to fade as she gazed at the night with fevered eyes, her fist choking off the cry that hovered on her lips. Sweat covered her skin; her forehead was burning to her cool fingers, though the fur robes were inadequate to comfort her icy trembling. She slipped in and out of consciousness until daylight, too weak to seek the water her throat craved.

When Teres had not appeared by late morning, Kane decided to awaken her. He entered after her hoarse voice answered his tentative knock. A trace of alarm touched his features when he found her prostrate with fever.

"Go back to your toads and sorceries, and let me die in peace!" Teres growled plaintively. Her damp hands pushed him away, but there was no strength in her arms.

"Head's like a boiled egg," commented Kane, withdrawing his hand from her brow. He questioned her solicitously but received only vague reply.

"Damn it, Kane! Leave me alone!" she snarled, and struck at him weakly when he pulled away her furs and pressed his cheek to her bare back.

"Damn it, keep still!" he returned. "I'm trying to get some idea of what's wrong with you!" He began to thump her back carefully with the fingers of both hands.

"You're no physician... though only Thoem the Accursed knows what else you may be!"

"How do you know what I am and what I'm not! My years are greater than you imagine, and a man learns what he needs, if he thinks to defy both death and ennui."

Teres felt too dismal at the moment to berate him further. His touch was gentle, his manner concerned, and though she suspected Kane was only playing for her trust, his attention was not unpleasant: At this point she doubted whether anything could make her more miserable than this febrile torpidude.

"Your lungs sound clear enough," Kane declared. "I don't think there's a pneumonia--at least, not yet. More likely, you've caught the grandfather of colds, from exposure to the damp in your fatigued state. Or maybe you've inhaled some noisome swamp vapors--Kranor-Rill's very breath is poisoned in many places."

He sorted through the chamber's scant possessions, muttering to himself. "I've only transported the barest of provisions to Arellarti, as you can see," he explained. "But I do have some useful drugs on hand." He measured out a grayish-yellow powder and stirred it into a cup of wine.

"If I may choose, I prefer a sword to poison."

"I understand why Malchion looks ten years older than his years," grumbled Kane in vexation. "Your judgment is as hasty as your logic is erratic. I know poisons that would send you to Hell in the throes of insurmountable ecstasy; only the slain know how sharp is the bite of cold steel. However, this drug will break your fever. It's a subtle compound of barks, molds, roots and other medicaments, with which I doubt your backward Wollendan physicians are familiar. Smile and drink it, or wither away with fever. The hours I can spare away from Selonari are rather limited at present, and I dislike leaving a delirious girl alone in Toad Hall."

The potion was bitter and probably contained a soporific, for Teres fell asleep shortly thereafter, musing upon Kane's knowledge of esoteric drugs.

He looked in on her a number of times in the course of the afternoon, the night and the day that followed. The drug was efficacious, for her fever soon broke, and the throbbing in her head left her. She slept for long periods, still haunted by bizarre dreams that merged into her waking thoughts. Kane's touch, cool on her febrile skin, she was aware of hazily-as if she were apart from herself, watching a fever-racked girl, cradled in his great arms while he held a cup to the stranger's pale lips. He talked to her, though she made little response--a rambling monologue her delirium fogged mind did not follow. There remained only an impression of names, lands and cities of distant continents, of lost ages. How many of the fragments of memory that came to her later were from his words or her imagination, Teres never was certain.

The fever left her one morning--at least, for a time. Strength returned to her limbs, driving away the dull lassitude that had held her so long in its vampirish embrace. Her depression chased after her distemperature, although some weakness persisted. The tower room stifled her, and Teres decided to taste the morning air. Kane, despite her confused feelings toward him, afforded intriguing companionship, so she set out to find him.

Her hulking guards evidently guessed her intention, or acted at Kane's command, for when she quitted the chamber, the watchful Rillyti pointed the way. Keeping well away from the grotesque creatures, she followed them to a low structure that fronted on the central courtyard.

Kane was inside, crouched near a deep crack that had rent both wall and floor of the rubble-strewn building. The light was uncertain, so that Teres could not at once discern Kane's action. When she drew closer, she wondered whether fever might not still be twisting her mind.

Rising from the fault in the floor, a vast and misshapen spider web slanted over a mound of curious debris. An enormous spider hung upon the web--larger than any tarantula of Kranor-Rill it was, and its thick black legs outspanned even Kane's outsize hands. The arachnid's bloated body seemed oddly proportioned, bulky as a man's fists held end to end, and the sparsely bristled chitin gleamed like a droplet of black blood.

Kane was intent upon the creature, so that he failed to look up at Teres's entrance. Kneeling beside the web, he appeared to be thrusting something toward the spider. Teres gained the weird sensation that he whispered to the thing, though the echoes of the place clearly played tricks with her mind, since she seemed to hear two faint and chattering noises.

She was almost touching Kane's shoulder before he noticed her presence. The spider uttered an annoyed rasping sound and scurried on its stubby legs into the deep crack in the stone floor, but not before its iridescent eyes had met Teres's with a gaze of iniquitous intelligence. She cried out, clutched at Kane's arm.

"He didn't like you," Kane mumbled, and held open his hand. "He left before he finished eating." Bits of melon lay on his palm.

"Spiders don't eat melon," Teres said shakily, unable to decide if this were not another phantom of delirium, "This one does," laughed Kane at some secret jest. His eyes were dilated, for a moment unfocused. "Especially when it's seasoned to his taste." Blood seeped from a cut along his thumb.

Repelled by the shadow of madness that twisted about her, Teres fled the ruined structure. Outside she wandered aimlessly--she could not say how long--before she felt Kane's presence at her side.

Though his face was strangely flushed, Kane had his wonted bland manner. In view of his casual attitude, Teres wondered how much of what she had witnessed had been fever dream, or whether transient insanity lurked behind the cold murderlust of Kane's uncanny eyes. She realized he was asking about her health, a mundane inquiry that seemed in utter contrast to the sinister aura of Arellarti. She made an unthinking reply.

"Then let's hope your recovery is a lasting one," Kane continued. "I'll have to leave you for a time now. My absences from Dribeck's presence are sometimes awkward to account for, and I've stayed overlong already. Still, I didn't care to leave you until you were yourself again. So I'll return to Selonari soon, though I'd far rather lounge around Toad Hall and partake of yellow sunshine."

"Damned considerate of you to endanger your dark schemes, just to wipe my brow," Teresa muttered. "How does your plot progress?"

"Well enough," Kane smiled. "Malchion believes his daughter was secretly murdered, Dribeck thinks you're lurking somewhere within, Selonari's borders yet, and efforts to renew the conflict rumble along frenziedly. By the time Bloodstone has attained the peak of its power, the land will be in such chaos I could take it with a hundred good men."

"I'm overawed."

Kane watched her sharply. "How long will this petulance sour you, Teres? Am I so much more to be despised than any other conqueror?"

"You are blackened by the evil you seek to wield, by the treachery of your tactics," she quickly answered.

He stared at her with impatient lines to his jaw. "A man wields the weapons he can master. The power of an army, the power of Bloodstone... tools of destruction, tools of empire. A man dies from a blade as surely as from... Bloodstone."

"You're an unusual girl, Teres, and I've known many women. You'd think me mad if I told you more, but you're unlike anyone I've encountered in all my years of wandering. To say I find you fascinating is superfluous. You're a strong woman... one who admires strength when she sees it in others. We are similar, perhaps."

"Through Bloodstone I command power to carve an empire across the Earth, limited only by my own interest in the game! My triumph need not be flawed again by loneliness. I would share my power with one strong enough!"

"You're mad if you think I would sell my soul to you!"

"Am I?" Kane sought her eyes. "There's something in your eyes, I can see when you look at me... something you try to force back. Think about it, Teres. To these clods you're a freak--at best you'll maybe rule a few years over your backwater city-state, an outsider to your subjects, a stranger to yourself. What's noble in that? Mine will be power such as no man has ever held--not just the tepid pleasure of ruling over the conquered nations of mankind! I offer to place you at my side, and you say I'm mad to tempt you. What paltry romantic stupidity!"

"Your high opinion of another's ethics bespeaks the obvious absence of your own conscience," Teres coldly commented.

"Ethics! Your moral scruples are a senseless wasteland of contradictions and stupidity!" he exploded. "I serve Kane, and no other gods or obscure values!"

"Obviously."

"Where were your high principles when you so joyously led an invading army to destroy Selonari?" he countered.

Her answer was ready. "Dribeck plotted against us. We fought back as men should--with honest steel and muscle-not alien sorcery!"

"The soldiers who fell doubtless smiled at the rightness of their dying." Kane's sarcasm was scathing. "Death is death. Victory is victory. The difference is strength... of men, of weapons, of strategy, whatever. Bloodstone is my strength; strength greater than any army. And victory always decides the morality of war--after the fact."

Teres made a disgusted sound. But after her indignation left her, in the hours she sat alone in the alien city, Kane's words haunted her, bedeviled her thoughts.

"Bloodstone grows more powerful with each day," remarked Kane one afternoon. He had just returned after an absence of days, and Teres found his company a welcome relief. The Rillyti ignored her, so long as she did not approach the city walls. But the gnawing concern whether they might disregard Kane's commands plagued her, and familiarity had not lessened her revulsion for the batrachians.

"I don't see how this obsessive restoration of Arellarti has any bearing on your crystal demon," Teres prodded. "Granted you want the walls secure against siege, and the causeway must be cleared for you to lead your army from the swamp, but why waste effort, as you do, on reconstruction of trivial ornamentation? For that matter, why do you repair these useless buildings? There are far more here than you and these creatures can occupy, and a number of these structures appear of totally nonfunctional design--not even windows or doors on some!"

"The Krelran were not an extravagant race," Kane said evasively. "Nor is Bloodstone of poetic temperament. Arellarti was engineered as a functional unit; Bloodstone directs its completion according to the original plan. That which is superfluous to man may be significant to Bloodstone."

Teres shivered. "At night when I look from the tower I can see its malignant nimbus hovering over the dome."

"The glow effulges as its energy waxes," Kane commented. "The life pulse of Arellarti beats stronger. Shun that region of the city, Teres, especially on moonless nights."

A caustic retort on his solicitude died in her throat. Instead, she remained silent at his side, looking out over the fire-hued city. "Why do you pursue this insane scheme, Kane?" she asked finally. "Either Malchion or Dribeck would give you wealth and honor, if you would serve them loyally. What more can you gain by unshackling this monstrous power upon mankind? I won't argue that power and riches are worth the struggle to possess. But how many of those men who have plotted and fought to build the

empires of history ever found their prize worth the winning? Any Wollendan lord knows greater happiness--he has fortune and power beyond his needs, and the cares of a thankless and rebellious nation are not his concern.

"I'll not deny my attraction to you, Kane. You spoke the truth when you said we are much alike. We are both outsiders among the people we think to rule. I, too, admire strength, and ruthless demon though I know you to be, you are stronger than any man I've known!

"Kane, give up this accursed venture! Destroy Bloodstone, if you really can do that! Return with me to Breimen! If you do this, I swear to you I will never speak of your treachery, your sorcerous schemes, I'll tell Malchion only that you helped me escape from Dribeck, that when your position in Selonari became suspect, you brought me from hiding and fled with me to Breimen. No one will doubt this. If you serve us faithfully, Malchion will give you all that you desire. Nor will my father rule forever, and with a strong man beside me, my control of Breimen will be assured. Come away from this accursed city, Kane! Come away with me! We'll rule together--over Breimen, Selonari, or any other city-state we set our blades against!"

Their hands met on the ledge. Kane's voice was low. "Almost I hear myself assenting to your thoughts, Teres. And if my motivations were as simple and direct as you project them, then I might well destroy this power I've unchained here and go away from Arellarti to carve out a kingdom at your side."

Her face showed anger, but there was bitter pain in her voice. "But you won't, of course! Your greed for power is far closer to your black heart than any love you claim to feel for me!"

"Now you begin to speak like a woman. Try to realize that there is more to my seeking than a blind lust for power."

"And you speak like a man--defending your ego by pleading for my lesser intellect to understand!"

"I'm not sure any human can understand my mind! You first considered me an ambitious adventurer; later you saw me as a treacherous demon--Thoem knows what you think of me at this moment! Teres, you grasp but the barest shade of my thoughts, my motives!"

"I'm in a reckless mood tonight! Pray, shine light through the darkness of my poor ignorance."

He was silent for a long time. Evening gathered over Arellarti, where a dark star shone in the city's heart. Teres scraped her finger along the tower window, struggling with the tormenting dichotomy of anger and love she felt toward Kane.

"How old am I, Teres?" Kane asked suddenly.

The question seemed pointless. "Outwardly you look perhaps ten years my senior. But your manner hints of greater experience, and since you ask so ominously, let me hang another ten years of infamy on your shoulders."

"And if I told you that outwardly my body has remained unchanged for more than ten times the years you ascribe to me?"

Teres stared at him in disbelief, wondering what game he played with her. The Southern Lands stood along the frontier of mankind's emerging civilization; here sorcery was not the familiar force it might be on the greater continents. Teres had heard countless dark tales, but she had little firsthand knowledge of

magic, aside from the trivial displays of hedge wizards... and the awesome secrets the priests of Ommem were said to guard.

"You don't look like those gnarled and ancient sorcerers I've heard about, who crouch in their towers for generations, mumbling foul incantations, glutting their depraved minds with secret and damnable knowledge. Though there's madness in your eyes, I find you human enough. Your blood ran red as any man's that day by the Macewen."

Kane's gesture was impatient. He had started to bare something of his soul to her and found her reception indifferent. "Your acquaintance with occult powers is limited, I think you'll agree. A man can be immortal, in that Time's destroying breath cannot wither his physical being. So long as such a man eluded death by violence, he might live to wander through centuries... watch present become history, history pass into legend, legend fade beyond the memory of man. Wounded, his body would heal without a scar, endlessly rejuvenated to the state it held at the instant of an insane god's curse."

"Immortality is not deemed a curse."

"What do mortals know? Flesh can heal, but the soul can be scarred! To be doomed to wander through eternity... branded an outcast, no land to call home, no man to name friend! Whatever he seeks to love--to grasp--slips through his embrace inevitably. Age consumes the bones of his hope. The loneliness! Only memories, cold phantoms to torture his dreams. And the hideous, smothering boredom that creeps more stifling with each decade, as the taste of life's frantic delights and transient interests grows stale and dry upon his spirit! It is a curse that waxes less endurable with each passing year. Imagine, if you can, how infinitely precious any chance to discover new adventure would become to this man!"

"Suicide is not an infrequent surcease to despair," she replied cynically.

"And suicide would be the ultimate surrender to the malevolent will of the god who damned him!" he fiercely proclaimed.

"Why was this man doomed to such an existence?" Teres asked uncertainly, wondering how much credence to give Kane's rambling discourse.

But Kane lapsed into reticence, evidently regretting his outburst of emotion. "Perhaps I share something of this man's spirit," he stated vaguely. "I seek more from Bloodstone than the serpent-fanged majesty of rulership, though I'll not deny the game of empire intrigues me.

"Bloodstone's power is as limitless as the energy that drives the cosmos, holds the dimensions of alien universes within their separate planes. There are countless channels into which I can direct this power. You've seen its energy transmute crude materials into wondrous substances; its furnaces could pour forth gold or diamonds, as readily as they transform swamp muck into steel-hard bronze. Bloodstone's power could annihilate a nation, or raise new lands from the depths of the sea. You're witness as it rebuilds a dead city. Soon you'll behold the destruction of armies!

"But another facet of Bloodstone's power holds greater promise and fascination. There are certain flaws and folds in the fabric of the interdimensional planes... points where lines in the cosmic lattice impinge upon one another. The cosmos is a realm that Bloodstone courses through, like a ship on some fantastic sea. Its creators harnessed its energies to give the crystal control over these gateways through the universe. Thus, by the power of this ring, I can direct Bloodstone to project my body through its energy field--through these interdimensional passageways--and into the point of focus where the passages open

onto our world. By the same power, I can return to Arellarti when I desire. You've already seen me accomplish this--the night I returned from Selonari to spare your life, the other times I've left here and returned again. There are only eight points within the Southern Lands where this focus occurs, and three are yet too far from here for Bloodstone to transport me. Fortunately one such point is in the cellar of an abandoned palace in Selonari; another is a cave just a few hours' ride from Breimen. It's curious that these points of focus all are in places about which macabre legends have grown up.

"When Bloodstone attains its full power, I can travel through any of these gateways... wherever they emerge upon the Earth. In the first days of its rebirth, Bloodstone could not have projected my body beyond these walls. But the time is not distant when I can journey beyond the Western Sea to any of the fabled continents of our world, lands where man has only begun to cast his shadow! And unless I misread the hints which flicker through Bloodstone's secret thoughts, its power can transport me to the stars and beyond! Bloodstone is a key to the limitless cosmos from which it draws energy; when the key is forged completely, it shall unlock the doors of the infinite... and I will be master of its secrets! What hold will the specter of boredom have upon me when the mysteries of the cosmos open to my touch!

"The full range of Bloodstone's power is incalculable. Even an imagination as jaded as mine falters incredulously at the images which flash like dying stars across the blackness of its mind! And I can only grasp the implications of its thought that have meaning to the human mind! What further mysteries pulse within its crystal depths defies all comprehension!

"Think well on this, Teres! Am I madman or traitor, because I hold the key to such unimaginable power... and dare to use it? Could any man ever offer to share with you a vision such as mine?"

Her sinister forebodings seemed less substantial to her as the force of Kane's zeal washed over her thoughts. His arguments were insidious; instinctively she knew them to be the logic of soulless evil, but reason could not always deny the rationality with which they were structured.

"I don't know, Kane," she replied uncertainly. "Somehow I know that your thoughts are subtle poison, hateful to all I believe in."

"And by what sanctity do your cherished values stand pristine from the tide of challenging ideas?" he asked sardonically.

"Let me think, Kane. Let me think for myself."

When it came, it was there. Perhaps it had been there already, held back by denial. Maybe it had come upon her gradually. Teres only knew that it was there, irrepressible the instant of realization.

Kane had returned at night. He evidently stole away whenever he could do so, although his absence could be disastrous if noticed. And Teres knew that. The cursory attention he gave to affairs of Arellarti could not justify the risks he took in returning so often.

He had brought some wine, some few provisions to spice the unpalatable fare the Rillyti served them. They were sitting close, feeling the rush of the heady wine. Kane made some chance remark that brought laughter to Teres.

How long since last I laughed? mused Teres dizzily, wondering that so human a sound could ring in this alien city. Their eyes met, held in the silence after her laugh.

Kane leaned forward, cupped her head in his hand. Automatically Teres thought to pull away, but feeling a stirring in her breast, she held her ground. Their lips met softly, and her eyes closed as they kissed. As she sensed his presence enfolding her, her thoughts swirled in a vortex of conflicting emotions.

One half of her won out, and Teres returned the kiss insistently. In that instant she knew she would not draw away from his touch, nor hold back the feelings that coursed through her being. Her arms reached to take his shoulders, anchor against their strength as the long-denied storm of emotion engulfed them both.

They made love with a wild awkwardness that first night--exploring--as if amazed at the newness they found, in one another and in themselves. The surging power that overwhelmed them was almost brutal in its intensity, and their bodies tossed upon the fur robes as if in combat. Afterwards, the passion they had shared left both of them shaken--purged, and at once fulfilled.

An odd languor of contentment warmed Teres as she lay across Kane's chest, head under his chin. Her unbound hair spilled over their flesh like stolen sunlight, rippling through Kane's fingers as he stroked smooth their tangled tresses. Forgotten in their frenzy, Kane's dagger lay atop a pile of crumpled clothing. It would be so easy to snatch it up, to drive its point through this sated brute's unsuspecting heart.

But Teres knew she would not. Whatever villainy Kane might be plotting for tomorrow, tonight they were together as two people in love. Love? she mused. A sickly word, synonym for weakness--so she had thought. This could not be love they shared, for this was strength, not flutter-hearted mooning.

Kane's eyes met hers. She knew his look had followed hers to the nearby dirk, his thoughts drifting with hers. There was a smile on his lips as he sensed her rejection of the weapon's temptation.

Noting his smile, Teres twisted upon him, threw her knees astride his hips, and leaned forward as if to pin his shoulders. "Are you purring, you great grinning tomcat?" she hissed in his face. "Because I choose to lie with you, don't imagine in your smug contentment that you're my master. I propose to take you at your promise, Kane--to share as equals what fate gives to us each. But the day you expect submission from Teres... for that gloating conceit, I'll kill you with my bare hands!"

"Your warning is one I'll honor!" Kane laughed and sealed her lips with his. Then, as Teres felt their passion blaze afresh, she enfolded him in her velvet-soft embrace and jarred breath from him with the steel that lay within.

The autumn was fading, and night came sooner now than when Teres had ridden with an army from the gates of Breimen. So few weeks, she reflected, lying sleepless against Kane's shoulder. How disordered her existence had become. It should have taken longer to tear loose the pattern that a lifetime had woven.

Tendrils of evil light shone green through the tower window. It watches us here, mused Teres. Kane had laughed when she curtained the opening, but to her the baleful glow profaned their lovemaking. The light from Bloodstone reached into the sky now, like some demented moon that had fallen to earth, still shedding sickly luminance. Along the borders, men spoke uneasily of the uncanny glow that seeped

through the nighttime mists of Kranor-Rill, so Kane told her. Their notice worried him little, however, since he confidently foretold the triumph of his plans before winter's advent. The second stage of the ruinous war between Breimen and Selonari was not far distant, nor would many more weeks pass before Arellarti would be completed according to the masterplan of its eons-vanished Krelran founders.

But with each passing day, Teres's spirit troubled her more. Kane's venture could only loose evil upon the Earth, of this she was convinced. And although his vivid dreams of immeasurable power tempted her desperately, it went against her soul to aid him in this effort. There was no escaping the recognition that Kane meant to overturn the world she knew... to make men slaves to this horror from Earth's savage dawn.

She loved Kane--or if this was not love they shared, she cared not to learn what love might be. For a time she had told herself that it was in her power to deter Kane from the evil he meant to do--persuade him to abandon this madness and go somewhere else with her. Even when she tried every wile, every subtlety she could command, Kane's obsession remained unswerving. Bitterly Teres accepted defeat in this battle, and the knowledge of her failure left her tormented with indecision.

Stealthily she slipped from Kane's side to draw closer the vagrant curtains. She glimpsed the gleaming dome through the shifting folds. Its coruscant glow loomed over Arellarti, washed like the tide about their tower.

Kane stirred fitfully in his sleep as she rearranged the furs to nestle against him. With a frown she noticed the sinister ring on his hand. It, too, shed soft luminescence, ominous in the night. Ordinarily her eyes shunned the malevolent ring, whose gem, Kane said, was brother to the giant crystal within the dome. Tonight she looked closely at the ring, noting in growing alarm that the pulsations of light in the scarlet veins of the gem matched the heartbeat she felt in Kane's chest.

He was deep in dreams tonight, so that a thought came to her. Cautiously she touched the ring, wondering if she might wrest it loose without waking him. The fit looked to be a tight one, but perhaps she could slip it free and smash it with a blow, before Kane realized her intention. The gem repelled her touch with unearthly chill. Tentatively she sought to twist the ring loose.

Teres bit her lip to stifle her scream. For the silver-white metal of the ring was fused to the flesh of Kane's finger.

Her face was hot and pale, her eyes reddened, when Kane awoke to kiss her in the morning light. "What is it?" he inquired anxiously, when her lips brushed his with unwonted apathy. "Didn't you sleep?"

"I lay awake though much of the night," she answered. "I think the fever returns."

"Then I wish you had awakened me. My sleep was without rest, for I sank into dreams I like not to recall." His fingers caressed her face tenderly, swept away the trailing blond tendrils that streaked her haggard face. Her flesh recoiled from the cold touch of the ring.

"Your face feels hot and drawn, your heart beats quickly. Damn! I had hoped this recurrent fever had broken for good, though I've noted a decline in your usual vigorous spirits of late. Wait, I'll get something." He padded across the stones to the chest where his possessions were kept.

"I don't want any more of your weird drugs," Teres Complained. "I'm sick of being imprisoned in this foul city, where the very air is poisoned by the fetid vapors of Kranor-Rill! Kane, can you take me along with you through Bloodstone?"

There was faint suspicion in his face as he looked up from the cabinet. "I've carried other objects close to my person through Bloodstone. It's power has now increased to the level where I could draw another person through the crystal with me, assuming we clung together like parting lovers." His eyes questioned her.

"Take me with you, then!" Teres pleaded. "Or do you consider me only your chattel? The atmosphere of this unwholesome place smothers my every breath, sucks like a feasting leech upon my vitality. Take me into the forest with you, Kane. Let me breathe fresh air, feel warm sunlight... spend an afternoon where the tainted aura of this elder-world horror does not lie. Please, Kane, I've lain too long in the shadow!"

Kane seemed to regret the suspicion he had nurtured. "Of course, Teres," he acceded. "The atmosphere of Arellarti is oppressive. I've been thoughtless not to give you relief from this noisome morass earlier. Small wonder your health is uncertain, when I've held you captive here these many days. There is a focus of cosmic stress that opens into the forest just north of here. Bloodstone's power should be sufficient to transport the two of us there."

There was a moment of terror when they entered the shadowy dome, where emerald light played about them, tinting their skin like ghastly corpse flesh. Teres swallowed her loathing fear and clutched Kane's arm as he strode confidently forward to the malignant crystal.

His hands adjusted the crystal knobs of the control dais in a manner she could not follow. Smiling encouragement--an iniquitous grin in the serpentine light--he led her to the glowing crystal. "Still game for this?" he asked.

Teres took umbrage at his bantering tone. "I can take anything you can!" she gritted.

"Stand close to me, then," he advised. "We have to share the force field of the ring."

Willingly Teres pressed her body against his massive frame, threw her arms about him as if in last embrace. From Bloodstone thrummed a high drone of power--felt in her head, though not audible to her ears. An electric tingling coursed through her then, and in dread she glimpsed a dancing web of green fire engulfing both their forms. Teres tightened her embrace in a final spasm, clinging to Kane as the vortex of

energy burst over them, sucked them down... down...

Hideous vertigo. Blackness. Falling for eternity. Falling through eternity.

Blaze of white light. Teres staggered as firmness pressed her boots. Then she did fall, overbalancing Kane; they struggled in a wriggling heap onto leaf-strewn stone. Bloodstone, Arellarti, Kranor-Rill... all had vanished. About them now rose the yellow and gold forest of autumn, where sunlight warm and familiar sifted through the richly hued trees.

A tortuous outcropping of gray stone-whose leaning and queerly eroded columns hinted that more than nature had been at work here--marked this focus of interdimensional flux. As Teres grappled for support against him, Kane's boot tripped on a broken pedestal, and the frightened girl fell atop him to the stone. In her panic, she pinned his arms that sought to catch their fall and with driving shoulder threw him back against a splintered column. Rock smashed into his skull, obliterating his consciousness in a haze of black pain.

Teres examined him anxiously. A deeper red matted his thick hair where the stone had struck, but his chest heaved regularly. It had almost been accidental, Teres reflected, though her actions had not been the work of a panic-stricken girl.

She had persuaded Kane to take her from Arellarti with no formulated plan or intention--except flight, escape from the evil luminance of Bloodstone, and from Kane as well, since he refused to break away from this unhallowed bond. Teres thought only to reach the world beyond the fog-shrouded tere, the world of men, of honest sunlight and firm ground. Where a lifetime ago a wild girl had striven to master the arts of war, as sung in minstrel's ballads, and never dreamed that she would be plunged into the black realm of elder Earth, whose legends were remembered in darker verse. Let Kane take her to the world she had left, then there would be hope to flee this cancerous terror. There was no other chance of escaping from Arellarti with its bestial guardians, and Kranor-Rill surrounding it like a poisonous moat. But how might she elude Kane? A hundred wild possibilities gibbered in her mind, but beyond the all-consuming need to escape, Teres had resolved nothing.

In the vertigo that claimed them as they passed between the planes of time and space--spewed forth upon this jagged knoll, to stagger and blink from the wrenching shock--Teres had seized her chance. Her need to escape made her movements almost instinctive. She tripped Kane as they swayed together and drove his head against the skewed rock. And now?

Her hand shook as she drew forth Kane's dirk. The haft was cold in her hands, its blade a white-hot sliver of light. She could kill him now, while he lay senseless. A cowardly way to slay so powerful a warrior, but she could never hope to match him in equal combat. And certainly he should be slain. Whatever her feelings toward this man--for he was a man, although his thoughts and motives might seem inhuman--there could be no denial of the treachery of his acts, nor of the alien evil he schemed to call back from the stars of Earth's dawn. He must die, if this horror were to be averted. True, he had saved her life on several counts; true, she believed she loved him, believed he returned her love. Balanced against the measureless suffering his mad dreams would hurl upon mankind... He must die, and her hand could strike the blow. The heroes whose legends she sought to emulate would not hesitate. Bright Ommem knew what crimes this man had perpetrated, should there be truth to his allusions to immortality. Kinder that a loving hand should wield the knife, strike here at the heart, a quick clean death before he awoke.

A stormwind of conflicting thoughts and emotions. Though its intolerable weight pained her arm as if she had held it forever, only seconds passed before she lowered the dagger. Almost despising her own

weakness, Teres knew she could not kill Kane like this.

The bloodstone ring blazed on his hand, its luster sullen and unnatural in the sunlight. It seemed to watch her. Perhaps it did. With a bark of mirthless laughter, Teres saw the answer to her dilemma. Kane could do nothing without the ring. If she destroyed it, his power would vanish, his dark schemes crumble like sand. Probably he would never forgive her, but it was better to live with the curse of his hatred than with the stain of his blood.

She touched the ring with shrinking fingers, yet gripping firmly, as if she held a viper by its neck. Her discovery of last night had not been nightmarish illusion; in the daylight she could see that the metal of the ring merged with the flesh of his middle finger. She tugged experimentally, but without dislodging it any fraction.

No matter. If the ring would not come away from finger, finger could come away from hand. Gruesome work, but a finger was a petty sacrifice under these dread circumstances. Quick, before he was aroused.

Steeling herself, Teres pinned Kane's left hand with her knee and stretched forth his middle finger. The gem shone like some unthinkable fire, imprisoned beneath depths of green sea. She set the razor-honed blade against the base of the digit and started to press down.

Teres screamed. The knife flung smoking from her nerveless hand, its edge blackened and fused where it had cut into Kane's skin. At the instant of incision a bolt of insurmountable agony had contacted the blade, coursed like unseen lightning along her arm. She fell back, stunned and sickened from the lancing pain.

"What the hell!" rumbled Kane, jolted abruptly from his stupor. He glared about in confusion, saw the shallow cut on his hand, the seared blade, the stricken girl. With grim suddenness his thoughts reconstructed what had transpired.

There was deadly fury ablaze in his killer's eyes as he struggled to his feet.

Teres recovered faster. The war of anger and pain across Kane's face was not good to look upon. Flight was all that remained for her.

She scrambled clear of the contorted cluster of rock, broke into the open forest, and thus gained a fair lead before Kane could clear his throbbing head and give pursuit. His heavy tread made a dull pounding upon the forest floor as he plunged after her. Once he called to her, but neither wasted breath on further sound.

Teres had the fleetness of a vixen. There was stamina in her long limbs, and with her lead she believed she could rapidly outdistance Kane. The other's brawny frame seemed far too bulky for a foot race, even though she had observed the sudden quickness of his movements. Still Teres knew she was faster of foot than most men, and she hoped to lose her pursuer in the thick timber before they had run far.

A short distance proved her hope to be misdirected. Like a charging bull, Kane leapt from the rocks and rushed after her. His initial burst of speed closed her lead, then, seeing that he could not overtake her at once, he paced himself to follow her at short interval. There was driving strength in his thick legs and enduring wind in his barrel chest. He hung onto her trail like a great, silent bearhound.

Teres set as fast a pace as she dared, then concentrated on maintaining it. Huge trunks flashed by her in blurs of gray, sometimes looming before her as if sprung up through sorcery. Roots and dead branches

clawed at her ankles, but somehow she avoided them as well. The forest gloom kept the ground barren of undergrowth, the tall trunks shorn of low branches, or their race would be of different character. Teres could not have plowed through underbrush as easily as her relentless pursuer. Like children playing tag through some fantastic temple of infinite pillars, they dashed through the deep forest, their footfalls muffled by leaf mold, so that louder sounded their panting breath, drumming hearts.

Bleakly Teres realized she could not shake Kane like this. With unfading strength he pounded along behind her, at times gaining a little, at others dropping somewhat back. But never did he lose sight of his quarry, and as the chase stretched on, it became apparent that he was slowly closing the distance between them. Fever and weeks of inaction had leached Teres's stamina. She gasped for breath now; her second wind was gone. Aching fatigue cramped her muscles, made ragged the grace of her-deer-like strides.

One of them must soon drop to the forest loam, she knew, and odds told her that person would be Teres, unless some miracle intervened, and quickly. She wasted brief effort trying to dodge through the maze of trunks, seeking to escape his sight, perhaps lose him in the forest. But Kane was too near to her now for this stratagem, nor had she the breath or agility to run an evasive course.

The forest abruptly opened upon a road. Her heart pounding too painfully for thought, Teres turned onto the road and used its firmer surface to gain a few strides on Kane. Fear alone gave strength to her agonized limbs now, and her chest ached too horribly to draw breath. On faltering legs she followed the roadway. With pitiless patience, Kane bore along in her steps like a wrathful nemesis, and it almost seemed she could feel his hoarse breath on her back. Though there was no hope of losing him here, the open road made running a fraction less difficult--maybe would give her another hundred yards of flight, before she collapsed to the earth to await Kane's anger. And if the gods of fortune could but grant it, perhaps there might lie a village hidden beneath the trees.

Trees whose canopied branches overarched the road made dazzling, dizzy mosaic of light and shadow to blanket the road, soft ground. Swaying ground.

A horse whinnied and reared. Men yelled startled curses. Blindly she had rounded a curve and burst upon a detachment of armed men. Soldiers! Her vision wavered too vertiginously to discern whose men they were, nor did she greatly care in her deathly exhaustion.

She dropped to her knees before the prancing mount, drew great sobbing mouthfuls of air into her flailing chest.

"What the hell's happening here!" demanded a familiar voice. Lord Dribeck calmed his pawing stallion and glared down at the gasping figure who had blocked his march. "Shenan's tits! It's Teres! Hers is a face that I won't forget! Scared out of her skin from the looks of things! And Kane! Another face that hangs in the mind! What are you doing here, Kane? What's going on!"

Kane gave no indication of being disconcerted. "I've caught a fugitive for you, milord," he explained, speaking slowly to draw breath. He wished now he had ended the chase in the forest, but he had been savoring Teres's hopeless fear, even though for the past mile or more he could have overtaken her. He might have ended her flight in another manner, but he had not meant to kill her, despite his anger.

"I thought you were scouting along the border," Dribeck was saying.

"So I was--until I intercepted some information which revealed Teres to be hiding along the fringes of Kranor-Rill. Didn't want to give her a chance to grow suspicious and slip away again, so I immediately

rode south. By killing my horse I got to the abandoned homestead where she laired before she had time to be wary. She sought to elude me through the forest, and the rest is obvious. I see you also learned of her hideout, since you were leading a company of soldiers to capture her." Kane uneasily wondered how much inquiry his glib story would bear up under.

"No, I'm leading my men toward Kranor-Rill to investigate--and I hope to quell--this growing alarm along the southern frontier. We're getting persistent rumors of weird glowing lights that emanate through the swamp mists at night, that the Rillyti are building some sort of road across the quicksands... Well, you've heard them all yourself." Dribeck looked searchingly at Kane, his face thoughtful. To be sure, appearances substantiated Kane's bewildering tale.

"Dribeck, if you believe this villain's lies any longer, you deserve the doom he plans for us all!" snarled Teres, who had found breath to speak at last.

A flicker of pain crossed Kane's features before he could recover his mask. Dribeck noted this. Kane's face now registered careful amusement.

"What's this raving?" Dribeck inquired.

"Her tongue is as venomous as ever," Kane remarked. "And after weeks of solitary skulking, she'll astound our ears with pent-up poisons."

Teres continued doggedly. "You believe Kane to be your trusted captain, don't you, Dribeck? Well, you're not the only fool in the Southern Lands; Malchion thinks Kane is his most resourceful spy. And we've both been bitten by this serpent in our midst. While Kane has played us off one against another, he's been master of his own game! In Arellarti he's discovered some monstrous power that he hopes to control--an evil power that will enslave all mankind, if he succeeds in setting it free! And we're to be first spoils of his conquest!"

"Now here's an amusing device," commented Kane sardonically. "Turn your enemies against one another, is that your thought, Teres? Your lies show great imagination, but you've spun them too fast--and too extravagant for credence. You would do better if you'd keep the fantasy simple, less grandiose." Doubt was whispering to him now. If this went much further...

"I'm surprised that the girl would offer such an implausible tale," Dribeck observed pointedly. "Unless, of course, there were some hint of truth to her distracted accusations."

"Only desperation and a quick imagination," Kane interceded hurriedly. "Your tale of phantom green radiances and the like furnished the skeleton for this hasty fabrication."

"I'll unmask a desperate liar!" Teres swore, rising on unsteady legs. "That remarkable ring he wears. He uses that ring to control Bloodstone--so he believes! But the ring is fused to his flesh, as his soul is welded to Bloodstone! Order Kane to remove the bloodstone ring and give it to you! Then we'll see how glib his tongue can be!"

"The matter is easily concluded then. Kane, pass me that odd ring you wear."

Nodding assent, Kane pulled at the ring. "Damn! It's a tight fit ever since I got the jeweler to cut it to size. That's why I so seldom take the thing off. Well, as you see, it's no more than a strangely styled ring that caught my fancy." He held forth his hand, brandishing the gem. "Now if we've indulged our prisoner's fancy long enough--"

"He can't remove the ring!" Teres persisted. "The ring is bonded to his flesh! Make him show you!"

"Let me see the ring, Kane. Give me your hand, if the ring won't slide over your knuckle." There was firmness in Dribeck's command.

"Milord," began Kane, feeling himself losing this duel, "it seems pointless to humor your prisoner's ill-conceived slander any further. You will naturally recall how loosely this ring fitted before I had a jeweler attend to it--overzealously as it turns out."

Dribeck's gaze did not falter. Behind him not a few of his soldiers had rested hands on swordhilts. He now recalled the significant fact that the ring's alteration had occurred while Kane was supposedly lost in Kranor-Rill.

Kane made a thin smile, acknowledging defeat, perhaps. Then his face grew savage with another emotion. "As you demand, I'll give you my ring!" he growled. He thrust out his left hand, clenched into a fist, the bloodstone facing them like a vengeful eye.

Some scrap of memory, some instinct warned her. Teres yelled, threw herself to the side, striking Dribeck's mount. The horse shied, sidestepping suddenly.

From the bloodstone ring shot forth a coruscant beam of energy, emerald light veined with scarlet, that crackled past the space where the two had stood!

Behind them, someone screamed in agony, men howled in fear. A soldier pitched downward in a contorted jumble, his flesh blackened as if lightning had blasted him. The stench of ozone and charred tissue tainted the air. Kane cursed in fury.

What followed happened quickly. Kane twisted toward Teres and Dribeck. Two of the mounted guard charged forward with drawn swords; Kane's attention was diverted to this new threat. Again a bolt of energy flared from his ring, and the guardsmen crumpled into a writhing, smouldering tangle. The foremost of Dribeck's swordsmen leaped to meet him and died hideously beneath the coruscating lance of energy.

Dribeck was not fool enough to face that which he could not fight. In the seconds that Kane's diversion gave him, he hauled Teres onto his saddle and spurred the stallion into the forest. As they left the roadway, a lethal ray shot past their heads and blasted a tree to glowing splinters. The horse lunged beneath the toppling branches, terror driving his hooves.

"Keep low!" Dribeck yelled needlessly. The stallion narrowly avoided collision with the trunks that flashed before them. Another ray of energy speared after them, laying waste to several trees. Its aim was wild. Kane had lost them in the timber.

On the roadway, alien death ravaged mercilessly. The Selonari broke and ran, after a foolhardy rush to overwhelm this lone demon of destruction left half their number blackened corpses. Kane raked the forest with his murderous weapon, throwing full disorder to their retreat. Men died in terrible swathes.

But as they vanished, his killing rage was slaked. Feeling weak of a sudden, he abandoned the slaughter and withdrew to the slanting circle of stones, where Bloodstone could transport him back to Arellarti. Alone.

The mask. was shattered. A land was raised against Kane. One man and the dark legacy of elder Earth.

VII

What Manner of Man...

"I suppose we were lucky that Kane didn't have a bow," Lord Dribeck remarked with assumed casualness. "He never would have missed us then."

"And if your men had held their ground like disciplined troops, the archers could have skewered his treacherous heart," Crempra pointed out.

"Easy to say when you weren't there yourself," scoffed Teres. "When you see the bodies... It was demon lightning he hurled from the ring! It doesn't matter how well-trained or how brave your men are--caught in the open, an unknown weapon that burns and destroys whatever it strikes! Hell, anyone would run for his ass!"

A wild ride had brought Dribeck and Teres to Selonari that night. As they rode, Teres told a breathless narrative of all that had happened to her since she disappeared from Dribeck's chambers. Ristkon's part in that bloody escape Dribeck had already surmised, and he bore her no malice for the turmoil his death had caused. In view of the altered circumstances arising from Kane's conspiracy, Teres now found herself in the role of tentative ally.

Once in Selonari, she collapsed from exhaustion and slept soundly throughout the night, While Dribeck pieced together the fragmented information this reversal had presented.

With morning came a courteous summons to a council of war convened by the Selonari lord to consider the new menace of Kane's treachery. Somewhat refreshed, Teres donned the loose-sleeved shirt of deep blue silk, vest and pants of burgundy deerskin, which she found laid out for her. The fresh garments pleased her, and she spent more than usual care with her braid, wondering how such mundane concerns were possible after the horror she had known. An escort showed her to the council chamber. Waiting there was an edgy assemblage composed of Lord Dribeck, Crempra, Asbraln, Ovstal, and several other officers and counselors whose names she had not recalled. Adding to Teres's narrative, Dribeck laid out such information as he had gathered.

"Hindsight is of little use to us," he remarked, separating Teres and Crempra from the prelude to a quarrel. "Unhappily, hindsight is about all we have, right now. Putting facts together, it's obvious that

Kane was indeed playing Breimen against Selonari for his own purposes. He provoked Malchion's invasion--which might or might not have taken place eventually--by plying him with all the fears, lies and rumors the Wolf's ear was ready to hear. To bring matters to a head, Kane pretended to warn Malchion of an assassination plot, then brazenly poisoned Ossvalt and tried to do the same for Lutwion--Teres has told us of his knowledge of strange drugs. When she fouled the net he had cast for Lutwion, Kane stalked him in the night, then killed him and his men with the power of his ring."

"There was another body found slain in that fashion," Teres interposed. "But we never identified him after the scavengers and the river had done their work."

Dribeck nodded. "I think I can hazard a guess. You mentioned that one of Lutwion's servants slipped away that night--you assumed he was the assassin. Actually I did have a spy insinuated into Lutwion's household, and the man vanished completely sometime about then. If I may theorize, perhaps my agent recognized Kane somehow, but with Kane's awareness of his knowledge. He tried to flee to pass on this information before Kane could deal with him, but Kane followed him from Lutwion's manor, and the bloodstone ring claimed another life that night."

"Why did Kane fight for us, though?" Ovstal wanted to know. "In the battle by the river, it was his sword and his leadership as much as any man's that carried the victory for Selonari."

"To the point that he saved my life," Dribeck added. "Perhaps a move to ensure my confidence in him." There was a strange tone to his voice for a moment. "And of course his position permitted him to pass scraps of information--mostly useless--to Malchion."

"But remember that Kane's is a mind of ingenious cunning. It shows in his entire strategy--the ease with which he manipulated all of us, from the moment he persuaded me to furnish him the expedition he needed to reach Arellarti. He might have written that book of statecraft he gave me at our first meeting. No, Kane's motives were more devious, and to make some bold statements, I think I follow his logic. Kane probably concluded that, left to the fortunes of battle, Breimen would conquer Selonari... and his judgment likely was sound. However, Kane saw little profit for him in such a victory; he desired a costly and drawn-out war, which would leave both powers too exhausted to pose a threat to him. Bluntly, Kane fought for Selonari to shift the odds--a great risk but justified, as fate proved. Thus he gave Malchion the misinformation that our army was encamped along the Macewen's fordings and lured the Wolf into a disastrous bridge crossing instead. And though both Riskon and I took credit for the cavalry tactics that turned the battle for us, the idea was Kane's; I thought his modesty most selfless."

"Ristkon's insubordination played into Kane's hands after the battle. I had privately announced my hope to conclude the war with a treaty of peace, following the collapse of Malchion's invasion. Kane's reaction to this turn of events was one you can imagine; it was his intent to prolong the war. Probably he would have attempted to free Teres, anyway, since she was the key to my proposed truce. As it happened, Ristkon set it all up for Kane to take charge of. He helped Teres escape, sent her off for Breimen with assurances that my offer of peace was only a mask for my own invasion of Breimen, then boldly advised me that her flight was obvious rejection of any treaty. The maidservants gave a picture of Ristkon's attempted rape, but they were buried in a closet when Kane arrived. So his part in the escape was never known, and I just assumed Teres had somehow slipped past us in the confusion of the night, which is about what did occur."

"But Kane hadn't calculated on the vagaries of the river. Teres blundered into his lair, and for reasons that aren't entirely apparent, Kane kept her alive in Arellarti. Meanwhile, he must have informed Malchion that I had secretly executed his daughter, thus continuing his game of stoking the fires of war between us. Teres has told us of the threat Kane mounts in Arellarti. If she hadn't had the nerve to

attempt an escape, very likely we'd all still dance like puppets for this mastermind--until he chose the moment to set loose this elder wizardry upon our unresisting and battle-weary lands."

"The man is incredible!" Asbraln exclaimed. "Taken of itself, his conspiracy is a masterpiece of ruthless cunning, a work of genius! But aside from his political machinations, there's this insane plot to revive some centuries-buried alien sorcery! What manner of man do we fight?"

"That mystery may lie deeper than we guess," declared Dribeck. "Some of Kane's enigmatic references--seemingly mad statements--that Teres has recounted awakened several haunting phantoms of memory. I spent part of the night going through my library, and I found something which is perhaps more sinister than mere coincidence. I wonder if any of you have read the works of Kethrid?"

Crempra grimaced. "Cousin, this is not the time to parade your--"

"But it is!" Dribeck interrupted impatiently. "Perhaps a bit more attention to history would have served us well before now. Quickly, then, before I bore you, Kethrid was probably the greatest mind of his age. More than any other man, he influenced the rise of Carsulyal, mankind's first great city. It was the men of Carsulyal--and particularly Kethrid--who salvaged from the ruins of elder Earth civilizations the fantastic stores of knowledge that overnight lifted our infant race from the semi-barbarism which followed the fall of the Golden Age to the advanced state of civilization we presently enjoy. Without thought or thanks to those who gave us this learning, I might add.

"Kethrid sailed the strange seas of man's birth, explored unknown coasts, new lands... found there the fallen cities of Earth's elder races. His adventures made an epic. The knowledge he brought back to Carsulyal formed the core of that civilization, and from there this rediscovered learning spread to all of mankind. Of Kethrid's final voyage we know nothing, for neither he and his crew nor his great ship, the Yhosal-Monyr, were ever seen again."

Dribeck referred to a richly bound volume. "Kethrid had a close friend--an adviser, colleague, comrade at arms--a stranger who journeyed with him and evidently had a major role in Kethrid's discoveries. His friend was named Kane, described as 'a gigantic warrior with knowledge of strange secrets,' who was 'left-handed, of fair but cruel face, with red hair, and cold blue eyes whose gaze calls to mind the murderous fury he shows in battle.' Of his past Kethrid knew--or at least wrote--nothing, except an intriguing passage that reads: 'There came to my mind that Kane of infamous name, whose soul was of the darkness of elder Earth, whose soul quested for the knowledge of the elder creatures who yet walked boldly and not in shadow, gods and demons whose glory was faded; he who defied our creator in that forgotten age of paradise; he who was doomed to wander eternally through the savage world of his making, driven by his curse, branded an outcast by the mark of death that lighted his eyes.'

"This Kane was with Kethrid on that final voyage from which no man returned. And the passage I've translated was penned by Kethrid over four centuries ago. As you say, Asbraln... what manner of man do we fight!"

Ovstal broke the silence. "Interesting, milord. Ominous, even. But of dubious practical worth to us. I'm more concerned with this Krelran weapon Kane means to use against us. Do your books tell us anything here?"

Dribeck shook his head. "Such information is more the province of sorcerous lore, where my tastes do not run. I'm hoping the Temple may know something of Arellarti--the priestesses of Shenan boast of occult knowledge, though their talents lie more in political intrigue and the amassment of wealth. I tried to get Gerwein here this morning but got a curt reply to the effect that the high priestess grants audiences,

she is not summoned to them. You tell me what to do.

"Succinctly, our knowledge of Kane's plans, his power, his defenses all lies in what Teres has told us. You've all listened to her story. So what do we know? Kane has rebuilt a fortress within Kranor-Rill. He commands an army of around a thousand or more Rillyti. In addition, he controls a weapon of unknown but obviously formidable power, which at present has reached only a fraction of its potential force. Kane plans to embark on a conquest of the Southern Lands... and Shenan knows to what greater extent his dark ambitions will lead him.

"What may we infer? Kane's power is limited--at least, for the present--so that he fears the combined might of Breimen and Selonari. Hence his efforts to reduce our strength to proportions he can overwhelm with his initial strike.

"Our course, gentlemen, is evident to us all. We must gather what strength we can, and invade Kranor-Rill. We must destroy Kane and the evil he has released there before Bloodstone attains power such that neither magic nor steel can stand against Kane!"

"A difficult siege," Ovstal speculated. "The Rillyti are awesome opponents to face in battle. We must cross an impenetrable morass to reach them. Once we're there, Arellarti will be a most imposing fortress to breach, and a lengthy siege is out of the question. Shenan knows what diabolical weapons Kane can use for defense."

"Well, we know it's going to be a costly battle. Still, Kane must be vulnerable, or he wouldn't have plotted so craftily to prevent this sort of attack. We can advance along the roadway his creatures rebuilt to invade us, so we'll be able to bring up siege machinery. We've no choice. Give Kane the time-he needs to complete his work there, and then there'll be no army that can stop him. Every hour we delay brings victory closer to Kane!"

"And Breimen?" Asbraln reminded.

"We fight a common cause. Likely we fight for the freedom of mankind! Our quarrel is pointless now--in fact, Kane was the instigator of our war. I'm relying on Teres to convince Malchion of this. Knowing the truth of Kane's deception, the menace he poses to both our lands, Malchion can only accept truce, unite with us in destroying Arellarti. Our combined strength is the very force Kane has feared all along. Let us sincerely hope his fears were well founded!"

Later that afternoon, Teres critically readjusted the harness of her stallion, for Dribeck had ordered him saddled, although she preferred to see to this task herself. The warhorse nickered a pleasant greeting, and Teres's eyes grew bright as she threw an arm about his gray neck. Her sword and other captured gear hung at his saddle. It was more than reunion for her; it was a return to the familiar face of existence she once had known, before Kane had drawn her into his own shadow world.

As she swung onto the saddle, she noted that Dribeck had started to offer a hand, then thought better of it. "Dribeck," she stated gravely, "If I never have a better reason, I'll always remember you with kindness for taking care of Gwellines for me. I trained him myself, and he's the best damn charger this land has ever bred."

"He is a magnificent animal," Dribeck agreed, reflecting that these were about the first civil words Teres had ever volunteered to him. "I'd have ridden him myself, but he damn near killed the first of my men who tried to mount him."

"Got my sword back, too," Teres murmured. Its balance and smaller hilt had been painstakingly crafted to her specifications. "Hell, you even got my boots fixed last night! You know how long it takes to get a pair of boots to fit just right? No better friend when you've broken them in just so. Dribeck... thanks."

He almost betrayed his astonishment. It had been his hope to win her confidence; why, then, did he find her unexpected warmth so unsettling? He muttered some depreciatory formula. "I had hoped you might have better memories of Selonari hospitality this time, though these are grim days that have found us. I dislike your immediate departure when you've barely rested, but in view of this crisis I can't but admire your endurance.

"Did these garments suit you? You cut a rather nice figure astride that stallion." That wasn't necessary to add.

Teres frowned slightly. "I'm told my face is a memorable one," she retorted with more bitterness than she intended. She thought again of Kane, but roughly pushed the image from her mind. She had made her decision.

Dribeck shrugged, unaccountably crestfallen at her rebuff. "Well, my men will escort you to the border; beyond there, the other prisoners I've released should be enough guard to get you to Breimen. I've got archers posted by the few of Kane's gateways we know of, but there's a chance he might break through elsewhere and try to waylay you. Doubt if he'll try anything, but I'm ready to expect the unexpected from that man.

"Good luck with Malchion. I'm counting on your testimony to carry the truce through. Let me know what aid he'll send to us here. An attack on Arellarti is going to call for everything we can marshal against Kane. You know better than any of us what defeat will mean."

"I know," said Teres in a low voice. She touched her heels to Gwellines.

XVIII

The Wolf Lays Plans

Teres gaped dumbly, wondering if her ears had lied to her--or whether her father had lost his senses. Her hearing was not at fault. Malchion drained his mug, clashed it against the table, and repeated, "We do nothing." Cosmallen refilled the mug and smiled uncertainly at Teres, who put her hand over her own cup.

"I don't understand," Teres declared in confusion.

It had been a taxing day. At her unexpected return to Breimen, Malchion, looking more dissolute than she remembered, had nearly cracked her ribs in a welcoming hug. On Kane's word he had assumed his daughter to be dead, and to find her alive and safe in his keep... truly this demanded a celebration. Teres had with great difficulty impressed upon him the gravity of her information and finally succeeded in conferring with Breimen's master in private.

Once she had her father's attention, to finish her narrative had been a major ordeal. With every new disclosure, Malchion would explode into a furious denunciation and shout hasty orders to Embrom, whom Teres would have to forestall until she had a chance to explain subsequent events. Malchion interrupted continually--missed points, made her repeat constantly, jumped ahead of her narrative, fired pointless questions. Her own temper blazed when, the Wolf flatly refused to believe certain parts of her story.

Somehow Teres had finished the tale, untangled matters so that even Malchion could understand all that had transpired. She thought that her father even believed her narrative--at least, far enough to recognize the genuine threat to his rule. But then his seemingly irrational response: "We do nothing."

"You don't believe what I've told you?" she queried. Malchion grunted and wiped his mustache on the back of his hand. "No, I believe you--at least, so far as Kane plotting some foul sorcery in that ruined city, and Dribeck ready to piss in his boots, for fear of what those toads will do to his army. Never did trust Kane, anyway--just used him as I could. No, I trust your word, Teres--it's just that you let that Selonari weakling twist your judgment to suit his schemes."

He hunched forward and stuck out his finger toward her. "Look, Teres. You say Kane provoked this war between us and Selonari. Well, maybe he did goad me into attacking sooner than I might have, maybe he did set the both of us up. Point is, I'd planned to invade Selonari sooner or later, anyway; you know that, and as I recall, you were restless to get on with it. Selonari has lands and wealth our people need, and those black-haired runts will always pose a threat to our frontier. If Wollendan is going to be the power in the Southern Lands, we can't have independent city-states like Selonari in our midst, that's all. What we've got here is a cultural conflict, and sooner or later, theirs is going to have to be swallowed up by our own."

"But Kane means to conquer the entire continent--Thoem knows what else he plans!" argued Teres, not wishing to dispute her father's statements.

"Well, now, maybe Kane does, or maybe he doesn't. Not wanting to disparage your judgment, Teres, but all this talk of Kane's invincible sorceries... we just have your word on how powerful this really is. Now, don't scream at your sire! Tell me, how much do you know, realistically, about elder-world races and cities and weapons and magic? Hmmm? All right, then, you just have Kane's word how real and powerful his forces will be and Kane's word isn't worth the spit it takes to speak it. And what man wouldn't boast and bluster, trying to impress a gullible girl, anyway--under the circumstances?"

"Damn your thick skull! I saw what he could do with just that ring! He butchered damn near fifty men!"

"Because none of those Selonari had balls or brains enough to step behind cover, take out an arrow, draw back on the bow, and kill that bastard dead as they get. Now, I'm not saying Kane isn't dangerous. The Rillyti alone should make a rough bunch to meet in open combat, from what I hear. What I'm saying is we don't really know that Kane stands as any real threat to Breimen or the rest of Wollendan.

"But we do know Kane threatens Selonari, and so Dribeck comes begging for us to help him. Well, bullshit! Of course he tells you mankind's in mortal danger; he wants our soldiers to fight his battles. Afterwards we'd find out how genuine Selonari's talk of peace really is. Well, the Wolf didn't rule this long to play the fool for that weak-armed schemer! Kane and Dribeck can fight it out as best they can--even Dribeck ought to be able to defeat one man and a lot of slime-eating toads. If they kill each other off, so much the better; I'll erect a monument to Kane's memory. Figure if Kane does make a decent fight of it, Selonari is going to come away too crippled to do much more than lick its wounds. Under those happy conditions, I doubt if there'll be much resistance to our army when we march south to avenge our earlier setback. Now do you see the Wolf's logic, cub?"

"Plainly. What happens if Kane defeats Dribeck and conquers Selonari for himself?" asked Teres darkly.

Malchion waved for another cup, his mood exuberant once more. "Dribeck's worry, not mine. Then we'll just take Selonari from Kane, is all. I mean, even if Kane's weapon makes him as dangerous a force as you make him out, he's still going to take a beating from Selonari before he can crawl out of his swamp. Fact of geography: it's a long march from Kranor-Rill to Breimen, and Selonari is between. He'll have to take Selonari before he moves north, or risk their cutting off his retreat and then have to fight on two fronts. If Kane gets past Selonari, it's a long dry march for a battle-weary army of toads to get to Breimen. By then, we can be ready. And if Kane turns out to be a genuine threat to Wollendan... well, there'll be a lot of swords and husky lads to swing them, waiting to show Kane how real men can fight!"

"Then you'll not even agree to a truce?" Teres's tone was dismal.

The Wolf made a flourishing gesture. "Sure, I'll accept Dribeck's truce, since that pleases you. Why not? I'm not prepared to renew the war just yet. Let Kane do our fighting for us. Afterwards... well, of course we'll know how to play that one, after the others have cast their dice. Never been a truce made that wasn't made to be broken sometime."

"Then I'll take your word to Dribeck: you agree to a truce, but you can spare no troops to invade Arellarti, since you're concerned first with Breimen's own defenses." She added hopefully, "Shall I say we'll be prepared to fight Kane, should he threaten our borders?"

"Say it however you like. Damned if a stay with those guileful bastards hasn't polished your tongue. But there's no reason for you to say anything to Dribeck; I can easily send some brittle-boned ambassador." He landed a whack on Cosmallen's bare thigh, causing the girl to slosh wine across the table.

"I'd rather go myself," Teres said dully.

"Well, I'm never one to deny my cub her whims, even when they're clearly pointless. And since that settles this 'grave crisis,' how about some serious drinking? After your adventures, the Wolf thinks Breimen should celebrate his cub's return in the proper manner."

"I'd rather not," Teres begged off. "These past days have been a grueling ordeal, and all I want to do now is stretch out on my own bed and sleep a few days through."

He gazed at her in surprise. "As you wish--not like you to drag away from a good night of raising hell, though. Well, I'll celebrate for the both of us."

"I'm sure," Teres acknowledged, and took her leave.

Cosmallen met her at the door. "That's a beautiful shirt, milady. May I feel the silk?" Her slim fingers caressed her shoulder.

Teres decided her mind was tormented by too many thoughts, too many memories to reflect upon throughout the night. "Bring us some wine, and come along, Cosmallen. Perhaps I'll let you try it on."

XIX

Dreams in Arellarti

Night lay deep upon Arellarti, the moon and stars dim and distant. Hidden from their wan light the city crouched beneath the mist, its rubrous walls rising in perfect geometry, alien beauty in a rotting land. To the moon's affrighted eye, Arellarti appeared as some monstrous and deadly spider, its misshapen form tinted and obscured by the iridescent bubble of blood in which it hung. The causeway stretched off to the forests like a filament of web, holding Arellarti suspended over the poisonous tarn. Slowly the spider was ascending its web, reaching out to the sleeping land beyond.

The coruscant effulgence of Bloodstone illumined the entire city and spilled over onto the murky slime of the swamp. Its emerald rays gave a sick hue to the mottled red stone, which now might be seen to be flecked with green throughout its density. For in the darkness, the very stones of Arellarti seemed translucent, as if the light of Bloodstone shone not only on the city, but through the city. The walls of the colossal dome were alive with the radiance that penetrated them--translucent almost to the extent that the sentient crystal within could be distinguished as a darker shadow through the walls. Its brilliance was that of a blood-red star, dying in a nova of venomous luminance.

Bathed in its eerie light, Kane slumped wearily against the crescent dais, a still-warm pipe lying beside him in a scatter of gray ashes. Heavy were Kane's thoughts, his spirit dark as the clouded night beyond the sullen glow of Bloodstone.

This began as an adventure, or so I believed. I thought no more of it than a means to raise an army of conquest--my major weapon arising from alien science rather than elder sorcery, my soldiers these bestial swamp creatures in place of human warriors. Men have fought for wizards and conquerors in the past; I reasoned that once my power was known, men would fight beneath my banner as willingly. Now the horror in which I have steeped myself creeps through the gloom of my spirit, so that even I sense the dread power that emanates from you. Could it be this time I've gone too far--that the revulsion men feel toward my power will prove greater than their lust to share in the spoils of conquest? Shall I stand more alone than before, with my entire race in arms against me, reviling the name of Kane?

Would that be so different from your present fate. Your only escape from your curse has been to wander ceaselessly, through lands where your name has faded from man's short memory, move on again when they have new reasons to remember. You will always be reviled, but my power will make you feared; never again will you be driven like a hunted wolf across the land. And from what I understand of your miserable race, there will be many whose souls can be gained for the yellow metal you prize so extravagantly, or the chance to seize another man's holdings without fear of retribution.

I thought I understood her. She loved me for a moment, then she grew to hate me. She would have given her heart to a conqueror, but it was not strength alone that she sought. When she recognized the alien evil I had bonded to my soul, she drew away from me in loathing... deceived me, joined with her enemy to destroy me. And at one time I could have abandoned this blighted venture, gone with her into her world, found happiness by her side.

For how long, immortal? Until she grew old and wrinkled, while you remained as you are now? Until you grew bored once more with playing warlord over these dull creatures--a petty ruler of a frontier land? I see in your mind that you have fallen to such stupidity in times past--and regretted it with bitter memories ever since. Have you then chosen to forget the lessons of your doomed existence? Have you decided to unman yourself with the dissembling cowardice, the whimpering self-doubts that your race proudly rationalizes as conscience? Such thoughts are not your own, Kane. It was the woman who poisoned you, deluded. you.... betrayed you. Can you deny now that love is the most cancerous of human weaknesses? A race whose emotions overrule rational thought should compensate for this failing and harness the stronger emotions. Hate and fear are far more dynamic principles than love; the former builds empires, the latter throws them away.

I might yet destroy you.

And would you?

No. I have gambled everything for the power you shall give me. And although the prize seems less glorious to me than before, my goal remains to create an undying empire, with all of mankind acknowledging as master the outcast Kane. If I succeed, perhaps I'll grow bored with this game, too, as I have with all others. Perhaps even the new worlds you promise to open to me will in time lose their novelty. And at that distant age, may I enjoy as much the destruction of all I've created as I hope to delight in the striving to win it!

Then if such amusement will lift you from this despondent brooding, take heart. Our enemies gather to destroy us, but already my power has so increased that we need not fear them. Soon the lattice will be complete, and I will no longer be a crippled, imperfect entity. I can draw upon the limitless energy of the cosmos, usurp this world from the rule of its sickly sun, search out through this new universe for the others.

What others?

The others of my race who dwell beyond the stars. I too know loneliness--trapped in this rotting wasteland for millennia, as was my fate. When I am at last complete, I can communicate with my brothers, wherever they may wait within the framework of the cosmos. We were so few, so long ago--it will be good to speak with my own kind once more.

Then are there human emotions secreted away in all those locked recesses of your consciousness? The shadow thoughts you seek to hide from my awareness? To return your sneer, do not allow your weak

emotions to interfere with the battle we now begin.

The emerald light pulsed and waned like dancing flame, but Kane had broken contact with the living crystal and listened no more to its insinuating thoughts. The vapor from the pipe lulled his tormented mind into a form of sleep where in his glowing dreams he seemed to sense monolithic laughter swirling about him.

XX

Night of Bloodstone

On the assumption that any attack from Arellarti, should Kane move first, must cross Kranor-Rill along the reconstructed causeway, Lord Dribeck had positioned a small company of soldiers near this point of egress. Until he could muster sufficient strength to lay siege to the hidden city, Dribeck intended to rely on this advance guard for intelligence of Kane's movements. Whether these men could hold the forest end of the causeway against whatever force might issue from Arellarti was a dubious matter.

So it was, that when the earth trembled beneath their feet, and the air was charged with the drawn-out roar of thunder--though the noon sky was almost cloudless--the soldiers looked to their weapons uneasily and muttered a few prayers that the gods be with them on what might become a suicidal mission. But when the tearing rumble died away, and the ground stayed firm and secure, there appeared no sequelae more sinister than a muffled whisper, like the rush of distant waters. Their waiting lost its painful intensity, so that men relaxed to speculate upon the strange phenomenon and laugh nervously over the fear that had breathed upon them.

At length their captain ordered a scouting party to circle the swampland toward the direction from which the disturbance had seemed to issue. Night overtook them before they could return, and so it was not until the following day when they made their report. A broad channel had miraculously appeared, gouging a straight course through Kranor-Rill, to the South Branch of the Neltoben River, and on into its mainstream. River water flowed into the swamp's seepage, forming a deep canal into the center of Kranor-Rill.

The captain considered this information at length, uncertain what interpretation to put upon it. Dutifully he sent a courier to Selonari, to inform Lord Dribeck of this cryptic work of sorcery. By the time the messenger delivered his report, the reason for the canal's sudden construction was no longer mystery.

In the gray hour before dawn, Breimen awoke to horror.

Through the veiling mists of twilight, an uncanny fleet slipped from Arellarti's reconstructed quays, whose stone piers knew the caress of deep waters for the first time in centuries. Past the glistening banks of heaped slime and muck, shattered vegetation and steaming mud, along the still oozing wound in Kranor-Rill's belly, the flotilla advanced through the freshly torn channel that opened the stagnant waters of the Neltoben's South Branch, and into its deeper North Branch, still turbulent from the cataclysmic redirection of its flow. Emerging into clear stream at last, the strange craft hurtled over the outraged current at fantastic speed, their velocity scarcely diminishing as they left the flow of the Neltoben and the Macewen and turned upstream upon the Clasten River.

The region along the river was desolate, a wilderness broken only by a few tiny settlements, which hung along the banks like sloughing scabs. Heavy mists obscured the riverbed; the waning moon was hidden. Except for those creatures whose hours were of the night, mankind slept.

So it happened that there were few who witnessed the passage of the demon ships through the enveloping fog. Only vague outlines could be glimpsed, dim flashes where the vapors were pierced by eddies of night wind. And what could be seen was sufficient to drive the watchers from the riverbank in fear-haunted flight.

A spectral fleet coursed along the river, and devils manned its decks. Long, gleaming hulls of silvery metal shaped the craft into titanic spearpoints whose cleaving prows balanced above the surface upon elongated struts. Foam streamed past the streaking bowfins to be swallowed in the churning turbulence that surged behind the stern, where silent turbines drove two unseen screws. The phantom decks were open, and their plates bore the weight of thirty or more monstrous passengers--hulking Rillyti warriors in full battle array. There were close to twenty of these bizarre vessels racing through the night at speeds which surpassed the fastest horse's gallop. In single line they followed the lead boat, whose course threaded the channel unimpeded by the darkness and mist. A huge silhouette of a man in billowing cloak could be fleetingly glimpsed at the leader's prow.

And so doom descended upon Breimen.

Fear quickly replaced astonishment in the wondering eyes of the guards who sleepily stood watch upon Breimen's walls of stone and timber. Out of the swirling mists appeared the demon fleet; silver fins retracted into the bow, as the strange craft slowed and thrust alien prows onto the riverbank. Their decks disgorged the Rillyti horde, and the predawn quiet was torn with fierce roars, thunderous splashing as the creatures leaped over the sides. Their bronze alloy swords glinted dully as the batrachian army advanced upon the darkened city, where the first shrill of alarm was summoning its people from dream to waking nightmare.

An awesome sight awaited the grim soldiers who hastily manned the city walls. Wreathed in mist like phantoms of drugged nightmare, the bufanoid invaders shambled toward the river gate. A mighty bar slid into place across the threatened portals, whose thick timbers were proof against any force short of heavy siege equipment--of which the invaders had none. Archers squinted for marks in the darkness, aimed desultory fire into the advancing ranks. The swamp creatures bore heavy armor upon their warty backs, and the arrows struck with little effect. A few venom-tipped spears arched back from them to the walls, sending its defenders behind cover, but these weapons were more suited to thrusting than to casting accurately.

Although the attack was not expected, word of Kane's treacherous plot had supplied most of the conversation in Breimen these past few days, and vivid accounts were advanced concerning his slaughter of Dribeck's men, the terrifying extent of his sorcerous powers. So it was that despite their initial horror, Breimen's soldiers prepared to withstand this inhuman invasion. Archers, shafts at ready, peered alertly through the gloom for sight of Kane, whose death would break the back of the Rillyti onslaught.

Frightened rumors notwithstanding, no man was prepared for what they beheld when Kane at last appeared. At the head of the amphibian's charge stood a glowing figure--a man-shaped specter formed of living energy--or perhaps encased in a wavering armor of baleful green fire. Like a vengeful demon, the shimmering figure strode toward the river gate, his army of blood-mad fiends at his back. Archers sent shaft after shaft into the glowing silhouette, a certain target in the darkness. His ominous progress did not falter, while crackling flashes along his energy web evidenced the accuracy of their arrows. The soldiers looked to their weapons, glanced for assurance at the heavy timbered gate--and waited for the creatures to storm the walls. Nor was their wait a lengthy one.

Scarcely had the alerted guard scrambled from barracks and dashed to the ramparts when horror reached for them. The demon figure halted before the barbican and extended his left arm. From the blazing circle upon his fist leaped a flame of coruscant energy--a lance of shimmering emerald and crimson-flecked light. As this eerie bolt of fire struck the barbican, the ripping concussion jarred the entire length of the wall. The gate buckled inward, its timbers blackened and shattered, iron bolts red-hot slag. Soldiers near the sundered portal were thrown back by the blast.

Through the smouldering gap charged the Rillyti, descending upon the dazed defenders in great hopping strides. Before the stunned and terror-stricken soldiers thought to block their rush, the batrachians were in their midst, golden blades slashing murderously, poisoned barbs stabbing into the disordered ranks. The suddenness of their attack had caught Breimen almost totally unprepared, and now the battle-mad Rillyti had blasted entrance into the startled city. Overwhelmed by the ferocity that leaped upon them, the defenders fell back in near rout.

Their plight would be all but hopeless once the swamp creatures controlled free entry into Breimen, and with this bleak knowledge the soldiers battled desperately to contain the enemy's advance. Determinedly they struggled with the Rillyti, whose size and strength made them deadly opponents even had they lacked their great swords and bronze armor. Reinforced by fresh troops and rallying townspeople, they massed to push back the bufanoid invaders. The struggle grew more intense; men fell upon the Rillyti with seeming disregard for their lives and pulled the monsters down by sheer weight of numbers.

For a moment it seemed that the defenders might succeed in driving back the Rillyti thrust. Then Kane appeared in the smoking rubble of the gate. Death lanced from Kane's fist, tore through the packed ranks of defenders like lightning from Hell. Here was terror against which no courage could stand. Men were flung apart, smashed to the stones as charred and twisted clumps of flesh, weapons fused to lifeless grips. Again and again the deadly bolts sought life, blasted it with annihilating caress. The horror on the faces of the dead sickened the heart, nor were the screams of brave men dying in fear encouraging sounds to hear. The mass of soldiers crumpled and fell apart, dissolved into panic-stricken flight from the destroying rays.

One warrior, driven mad by the horror that stalked among them, crawled past the tortured corpses and sprang upon Kane from behind. His outthrust sword speared for Kane's back and drove into the coruscating web of energy that surrounded him--touched, but did not penetrate. In a crackling instant, the blade fused into molten slag and its wielder flashed into glowing cinder that crumbled as it fell. Faced with an invulnerable creature who stalked them with a weapon of hellish destruction, the regrouped defenders

broke and fled. Behind them, cutting them down as they blindly ran, hopped the blood-crazed Rillyti, their invasion into the city's heart no longer challenged.

Once Breimen's walls had fallen to their attack, there followed not battle, but ruthless slaughter. Malchion had not yet recovered from his defeat at the Macewen crossing, and in his complacency over Dribeck's desperate truce, he had dropped the wartime vigilance which might have kept his city prepared--if preparations were possible against this onslaught of elder-world wizardry. Thus it was that the diminished Breim army had been taken unaware, thrown into disorder by the fearsome power of Bloodstone, the vicious savagery of the Rillyti, and their best had fallen in the battle before the river gate. Now only sporadic resistance met the intruders--disorganized reinforcements from other barracks, aroused townspeople with swords in sleep-dulled grip. Angry men who fought against the current of panic to face the inhuman reavers died under their irresistible weapons, or turned to join the flight.

The graying night was lit by the flames of massacre. In an effort to conserve Bloodstone's energy reserves--drawn upon heavily to blast out the channel through the swamp and to power the invasion fleet, in addition to his own utilization--Kane relinquished the energy screen which enveloped him. Surrounded by his massive warriors, he stood revealed in armor of bronze alloy, further protected by the darkness and tumult, although now and again a hastily aimed arrow struck close to him, or skittered off the unyielding metal plates. A fantastic statue of living bronze, he directed the pitiless attack through the writhing city, gleaming armor throwing multihued reflections of fire and blood, flashes of evil green.

Through the predawn streets his demon army surged, slaying every living creature who came before their blades, whether to do battle or in hopeless flight. The Rillyti were not unscathed. Despite the chaos, men rallied in desperate knots and sought to throw barricades across the streets. Their swords clashed bravely against the greater blades of the enemy; clubs and axes hacked and hammered, and at point-blank range their spears and arrows struck with lethal force. Again and again one of the towering batrachians was pulled down, torn to pieces by mob ferocity, hamstringed or gutted by a well-placed sword stroke, perhaps skewered by the envenomed fang of a captured spear. But there were hundreds of the bestial invaders, and the cost of their deaths was often a mound of human corpses. The circumstances of Kane's attack hindered the defenders' effective use of their superior numbers, and wherever resistance toughened, the deadly power of Kane's ring turned their stand into terrified rout.

Breimen was a young city, so that timber formed the bulk of its construction. Now flames shot to greet the dawn from uncounted sites, fired by Kane's energy bolts and by the torches of the Rillyti. Horrified townsmen sought sanctuary in their homes--sought, but did not find. In sheer lust to destroy, the swamp creatures smashed entrance into the frightened dwellings and slaughtered all within--freeman and slave, woman and child--leaving only flaming shambles, whose loot they bothered not to carry away. Fanned by the morning breeze, flames leaped from building to building, and there was no man to deny their hunger. Gibbering chaos marched the streets of Breimen, leaving a crushed and crimson trail to mark its passage.

Near Breimen's center waited Malchion's keep, a squat, unlovely structure of stone and timber, surrounded by palisade and dry moat of barbed spikes. Here men found shelter; resistance found a core to build upon. Roused from his wine-besotted sleep, the Wolf monitored the grim reports of those who had fled the enemy thrust. Malchion snapped orders in haste. All able-bodied men were to be taken into the keep and armed for its defense, until the proximity of Kane's advance forced them to raise the drawbridge. If walls and spiked trench thwarted their assault, there would be time for the rest of the stricken city to regroup, to draw strength from the outlying barracks. Runners were dispatched to spread Malchion's commands. Once a massed attack threatened Kane's rearguard, the Wolf would lead a sortie from the keep. Kane would be pincered between disciplined attacks on two sides, and the city whose belly he thought he had slashed through would close like a trap upon the inhuman army.

But Kane, who had planned a lightning raid, not a lengthy siege, recognized clearly that his position could be overextended. He had come not to conquer, but to destroy, and as the defense stiffened at Malchion's keep, he strode forward to deal with the enemy fortress with the power he commanded. Against the strafing archery fire, Kane was forced to reactivate his protecting cloak of wavering energy. Arrows spattered like spit on glowing steel as they struck the shimmering figure, this phantom of emerald flame who stalked through the smoke-clotted dawn.

Demon lightning, more potent than any he had yet unleashed, blazed from Kane's flame-sheathed fist. Its coruscant bolts met the palisaded wall in a shuddering blast. Timbers flared in consuming incandescence; stones fused, exploded into white-hot splinters. Those who could, fled the searing walls in blind fear; those less fortunate danced spasmodically upon the crackling death pyre. In seconds Kane's raking energy had devastated the fortress walls and driven survivors to cover.

No Rillyti surged past the smouldering debris of the blasted palisade, though there was none to dispute their rush upon the keep. Kane's attention quickly shifted to the embattled fortress; again the energy of Bloodstone leapt from his ring. More brilliant than ever before, full into the foundation wall the lance of fire struck. A tremendous concussion shook the entire fortress; the defenders sprawled across the reeling floor, plummeted from their perches. Like a hell-spawned hammer, the annihilating beam carved into the foundations, slashing through the splintering rock like a white-hot blade through a maiden's belly. Kane stood transfixed, a river of star-born energy coursing from his extended fist. Behind him, the Rillyti croaked in fright, cowered back from the exploding fragments that spun through the green-tinted fury of the walls.

The very stones seemed to scream in death agony, descant to the threnody of thundering explosion, crackling energy, terror-stricken howls. Half its length ablaze, its foundation wall torn away, the fortress of Breimen slowly settled against its wound. With a gathering rush, the entire keep crumpled onto its pyre, slammed against the blistered earth with a death roar like the last peals of thunder of a violent storm. Its hallways were jammed with hundreds of panic-maddened souls, fleeing hopelessly from the consuming rays. All but those who fought their way to the exits and leaped from leaning windows to seek flight through the horror-filled dawn--all but these few were crushed to screaming ruin, as the fortress toppled to blazing, broken rubble. Its promised security now closed upon them as a death-trap. The smoke from the holocaust obscured the skies of dawn, tainted the creeping sun to a rubrous crescent against the flame-streaked horizon.

The shifting web of energy flashed off with the cessation of the spiking beam, for the fortress no longer existed. Kane slumped wearily, barely able to bear the weight of his armor. The destruction of Malchion's keep had drained Bloodstone's energy reserves to a dangerous level, so that their return to Arellarti would be imperiled, should Kane draw upon the crystal for any more power.

But his purpose had been accomplished. Breimen was a broken cripple now, and the power he had demonstrated would cause men to reexamine their decision to challenge him. Calling back his marauding army, Kane ordered a return to their fleet.

Along the path they had entered, Breimen was ablaze, with the fires spreading throughout the city. It was necessary to cut their way back to the river by a different, circuitous route, which they fought through with little difficulty--for the destruction of Malchion's fortress along with the bulk of his remaining army had broken the back of the resistance. Those whose suicidal charges sought to halt their progress were summarily butchered, and never were the invaders pressed to the extreme that Kane need call upon the final reserves of Bloodstone's energy--the power they needed to drive the engines of their waiting craft.

The fleet which departed the dying city was lighter by almost half its number. But the power of Breimen was vanishing in the pall of smoke that enshrouded the morning sky.

XXI

No Tears in Selonari

Someone was knocking at her door. "Teres?"

She sat up, bewildered by the unfamiliar surroundings, thinking for a moment that she had awakened in Kane's tower. No, she was alone. This was Dribeck's citadel, where she had spent the last few days since returning to Selonari with the Wolf's message and an escort of twenty-five of her own men. Dribeck had read between the lines of Malchion's decision--and noted Teres's following, as well--though he kept his thoughts to himself. Teres wished guiltily that her father had permitted her to bring more of the men she counted as loyal, but the Wolf half suspected her motives. At least there would be a handful of swords to offset this shadow upon Breimen's honor.

"Teres?" Still the rapping. "Teres? It's Dribeck. I need to speak with you."

She recognized the voice. "Just a minute," she called uncertainty. The stars were bright through her windows; she could only have been asleep for a few hours. Feeling alarm, Teres sat up on the bed, naked in the wan flicker of a single lamp. Drawing free one of the dark fur robes, still warm where she had lain beneath it, she wrapped it about her figure and padded to the door.

"What is it?" she murmured uneasily, slipping back the bolt.

Dribeck's long face was worried. "I'd better come in," he advised. "I've just been given some grim news."

Teres frowned as the other pushed past her, giving no notice to her lack of attire. His manner was haunted; he was numb from some overwhelming disaster. "Kane... ?" she began in a strained voice.

"Yes." Dribeck stared at her with a stunned expression. Her heart is a warrior's, he told himself, so give it to her straight and have it done. "Word has just reached us, as survivors begin to arrive. Kane attacked Breimen two days ago with an army of Rillyti. There was a savage slaughter, and Malchion's keep was destroyed. When Kane withdrew, half the city was in flames. Breimen lies in defeated rains, and Kane retired to Arellarti with most of his army intact."

Teres slumped weak-kneed against the wall, her face ashen, the knuckles that gripped her robe blanched from stress. For a moment she was silent, unbelieving. Her lips worked, finally shaped words. "How?" she managed to utter.

Bleakly Dribeck related the terrified reports which the first to reach Selonari had given him. Teres listened without comment, white, immobile as a fur-draped statue. It seemed the wall must buckle from the immense weight that leaned upon it.

"My father?" she asked weakly.

Dribeck's voice was sympathetic. "He was within the fortress when its walls were blasted into rubble. It is doubtful that..." He did not finish the statement, nor was there need.

There was pain in her eyes, in her tone, though her face was calm. "The Wolf deserved a better death than that," she whispered. After a pause she added, "Or perhaps you feel his fate was a just one. After all, he refused to aid you--figured that Selonari and Kane could fight to the death, while Breimen played vulture."

Such had been Dribeck's thought, but he denied it, saying only, "A man fights by the rules he knows. A warrior's death should be in open battle, not as prey to black sorceries."

"Why Breimen?" Teres demanded of fate. Then, reflecting, "Was it revenge?"

"I think not," Dribeck assured her. "Kane's mind is too rational to risk everything for emotional gratification. It's doubtful that he knew of Malchion's neutrality. Probably he considered Breimen to have allied itself with Selonari, and he thought to counter this threat before Malchion marched south. From his tactics, it appears obvious as well that he meant to overawe his prospective enemies with a display of devastating power."

"Maybe," muttered Teres, thinking Dribeck knew only one facet of Kane's twisted psyche.

She seemed composed, so that Dribeck advanced a further point, albeit somewhat guiltily. "We're of course gathering information as fast as it comes in. My counselors are being roused while we speak--I've called an emergency meeting, naturally. Your presence would be of great value, but under the circumstances I understand your desire to--"

"To throw myself down and weep hysterically?" grated Teres, showing her teeth against her whiter face, two spots of scarlet emblazoned on the cheekbones like a demon mask. "So might a foolish girl honor the murder of her city and kin! A warrior sharpens his sword of vengeance! I'll be at your damned council!"

"As you wish," commended Dribeck, who had hoped for this response. "Come, then, when you are ready--you know the council chamber well enough by now." Asbraln was calling him from the hall, but he paused long enough to add, "Teres, I know my sincerity has at times seemed dubious, but... You have my genuine sympathy tonight--and my respect."

Teres barely acknowledged his departure. For a long while she remained braced against the wall, her arms clasp the furs to her body. At length she dropped onto the bed, realization of what had occurred finally creeping past the defense of disbelief. There was a sound in the lonely chamber then, a sobbing catch of breath, low and raking. But there were no tears in her eyes, so the choked sounds must have been curses.

Mechanically she drew on her clothing. This performance seemed commonplace as ever; might it be that nothing else in her life had changed?

She heard Dribeck's angry tone as she neared the council chamber. They had already begun, then--she had taken more time with her thoughts than she realized. The now familiar faces considered her gravely as she entered, but to outward appearances Teres was remarkably composed. Fear hung like a thick vapor over the circle of bleak faces.

Quickly Dribeck advised her of the most recent fragments of information, but when the conference resumed, Teres had the feeling its topic had changed. "The essential point--and subsequent information won't alter this--is that Kane was able to reduce Breimen to smoking rubble in a matter of hours, then withdraw to his fortress with relatively minor losses. Granted, Malchion was not expecting attack. Nonetheless Breimen was as well defended a city as Selonari, and although surprised and disorganized, the Wolf's army was probably as large as our own. Bluntly, the power that Kane wields makes lethal mockery of warfare as we know it. If Kane--when Kane decides to march against Selonari, we're fools to believe our city will fare any better against this alien sorcery.

"We can't let him choose his own time to strike. I say we must attack Arellarti at once!"

"Suicidal, at this point!" declared Ovstal.

"You know what will happen if we wait for Kane to come to our walls!" Dribeck retorted: "To carry the attack to him is our best chance. Damn it, we've been over this!"

"But then we counted on support from Breimen," Ovstal reminded.

"We can block off Kane's canal through the swamp," suggested Aion, one of Dribeck's more powerful supporters among the gentry. "Barricade the channel with logs, so he can't bring his transport boats out. Those toads won't be worth so much after a long march through the forest."

"Hell, Aion, use your head!" Dribeck remarked bitterly. "Kane carved that channel through the length of Kranor-Rill in less time than it takes to swim across! What kind of barrier would block him?"

"We should at least hold off for a few days," Ovstal persisted. "If it comes to a siege, we'll need every man we can muster. Malchion wouldn't help us before, but maybe now some of these Breim refugees will join with us."

"How many men do you think that will be?" commented Crempra, wincing under Teres's glare.

"Ill-bred, but accurate, cousin," Dribeck admitted. "We can't spare time to wait for dazed bands of refugees to trickle in. Kane needs that time more than, we do. My guess is that he dangerously overextended his power on the Breimen raid. Otherwise he wouldn't have crippled his enemy and then withdrawn--rather he'd have totally annihilated the city, or occupied it, perhaps. We strike now, and maybe we can hit before he recovers his strength--at least we'll attack before Bloodstone's power increases to whatever potential the crystal. can attain."

"My men and I will join your assault," growled Teres, speaking for the first time, "and with us will march any man of Breimen who still has spine to swing a blade."

"I'm sure we all appreciate the spirit of your offer," Ovstal replied ambiguously. "But there's another

problem. Courage and steel can't do battle with the weapons Kane commands. Our army marches into unguessable danger, and the men know it. Now, maybe it goes against your vaunted logic, but it's human nature to trust in thick walls and familiar weapons."

"You're saying...?"

"I'm saying the men might mutiny if you try to lay siege to Arellarti right now. They're brave men, but you can push them too far. Here in Selonari they can fight on secure ground."

"It may be that we can work a bargain with Kane," Arclec put in hastily, seeing Dribeck flush with anger.

Dribeck turned his wrath upon his wealthiest counselor. "After what Kane did to Breimen, knowing with what forces he's allied himself, can you seriously consider trying to bargain with Kane?"

There was no answer from the tight-pressed lips of those present.

"Since we must fight, let us fight that battle where we have a slim chance of victory," Dribeck went on.

"There's no denying our casualties will be unprecedented. But a man who is impaled upon his enemy's sword in dying disarms his enemy--and so is avenged by his comrades. It sickens me to propose that, in order to kill the serpent, we must suffer his strikes until his fangs are drained of venom. But unless someone knows a better strategy, these pitiless tactics are all we can fall back upon.

"As to mutiny, I think once tales spread of the massacre in Breimen, then men will know how vain is their trust in Selonari's walls. Kane once observed that bravery and desperation are at times inseparable. Comment?"

"Might as well die on the attack as on the defense," quoted Ovstal somberly. "With planning, with luck... maybe we can counter some of Kane's advantage. Spread our forces, make him waste his power in striking at small targets. Better yet, close with his minions, so he'd hesitate to fire. These bolts of energy are his deadliest weapon, so far as we know. Without that ring and in open combat, we'd have the numbers to chop apart his army. Be best if we could draw him out of his fortress. Lure him into the open, then attack with everything we can muster. Good trick if we could do it--but Kane's a damn clever strategist himself, that I'll give him."

"Can't we find some counterspell to protect the men from Kane's sorcery?" demanded Arclec, thinking of his position in the army's van.

"There may be hope," Dribeck announced. "I'm going to speak with Gerwein again. Last time she hinted that the Temple might have access to powers of magic as potent as Kane's frozen demon. She was vague, whether temporizing or truly uncertain what help she could give, I couldn't say. If the latter, she's had time now to search through the Temple's moldy vaults for forgotten secrets. If the former, let's hope the massacre at Breimen will warm her heart to our crass political endeavors."

Asbraln shook his head gloomily. "Ask help from the Temple, and the price won't be an easy one. It's been a hard battle to block Gerwein's ambitions as much as we've done."

Dribeck made a bitter face. "As we've said, these are desperate days before us. If Gerwein can be of help against Kane, we can't afford to ignore her aid. I only hope the cost won't make our victory a black one for us. But then, defeat looms blacker still."

XXII

The Vaults of the Temple

Gerwein was a model of imperious grace for so early in the morning, mysterious in a long-skirted gown of burgundy silk, patterned with patches of cream leather, and cunningly pierced to suggest the beauty it enswathed. Her raven hair was combed in long, softly curling tresses; her dark eyes were as inscrutably calculating as a cat's stare across a dimly lit room. Teres did not like the cold impersonality of her delicately chiseled face.

"The wild she-wolf," she stated, her gaze flicking over the rough-attired girl. Teres challenged her unwavering eyes. Gerwein could not have been more than five years her senior. "Do you bring her as bodyguard, Lord Dribeck... or do you think to sway my sympathies with the help of one of the goddess's sex?"

"I thought you might find it of benefit to speak with the only person who has firsthand knowledge of Kane's hidden power," replied Dribeck, keeping an even temper with difficulty, after a sleepless night of care.

"Perhaps. Yes, maybe we would have things to say to each other. But this morning I perceive a haunted urgency overshadowing your usual polished manner, milord, and cries from the street inform us of Kane's most recent work of infamy. Has the madman whom you welcomed among us returned to our gates so soon?"

Dribeck gave her a vivid account of all they had learned concerning Breimen's fate, watching her face for some show of unease. He was disappointed. The high priestess's air of mocking sophistication was unbroken, although she questioned them both on point after point.

Finally Gerwein fell silent, pondering the information they had given. Her beautiful face was unchanged, but she had come to a decision. "Come with me, if you please," she directed, rising from her chair of state. "It is rare that outsiders intrude beyond the Temple's halls of worship, but I see these are strange times."

Into the secret reaches of the Temple they followed her, through winding hallways that twisted past rooms with incense-laden air and groups of girls in pale tunics at study or at leisure, performing meaningless rituals or mundane household tasks. The hallway led down flights of stairs, became torchlit as the chevroned windows disappeared. Now the rooms were more often closed and locked, some with

doors whose timbers seemed inordinately massive. From behind one such door escaped the muffled sound of weeping, and Teres thought she saw a quick, cruel smile dance across Gerwein's lips.

They were well underground when the priestess paused before an iron-bound portal. "Knock," she invited. Dribeck complied.

A sharp face appeared at the spyhole, ducked, and then with a scraping of bolts, the door was opened. The room within was surprisingly large. Dribeck's harried countenance lit in admiration at the sight of the vast wealth of books and manuscripts stored along the extensive shelves. A trio of priestesses of middle to declining years were examining a number of musty volumes laid out upon a heavy table. A silver-gray disk of polished metal, perhaps five feet in diameter, lay flat against the table's center. Dribeck assumed it was a mirror-until he bent over and saw that the burnished circle cast no reflection.

"The Temple archives," announced Gerwein. "Repository of centuries of tedious records and arcane wisdom. In these fallen days, we daughters of Shenan have all but lost our ability to discriminate between the trivia of routine and the priceless knowledge whose secrets our cult once mastered. My sisters have labored ceaselessly these last days in the effort to distill knowledge of the elder Krelran race and their demon Bloodstone from this moldering dune of ancient parchment. Selonari is fortunate--as is the world beyond, it would seem--that our search has not been altogether in vain."

"What do you know of Arellarti?" Dribeck could not help blurting.

"Much. We hope to know more, once we can find a certain ancient manuscript that dates from our city's earliest days. So far, that volume has eluded us." Her smile was coldly triumphant. "But we've learned enough already from references in the other writings to recognize the nature of this crystal devil called Bloodstone. And more important--having learned this, we have discovered means to combat its power. It is likely that we shall be able to nullify the deadly energy bolts Kane controls through his ring... and I see my suave Lord Dribeck betrays his interest!"

"If you can counteract that one weapon, we can destroy Kane!" swore Dribeck, too intent to fence with the high priestess.

"Unless Bloodstone has other powers, and more deadly. But I think we're learning enough to do battle with Kane on even terms. From your statements, Teres, I see Kane once revealed a significant aspect of Krelran power, though your unlettered mind failed to grasp what he meant. You spoke of Bloodstone's power as 'sorcery,' and Kane said that you were in error, and by design or condescension to your ignorance, he never troubled to explain the distinction.

"Kane's power is that of science, not sorcery--although with elder-world science the distinction becomes blurred. But then, to untutored minds the distinction is difficult to grasp, for this lies in understanding the forces at work, and in the laws they obey. For example, to produce a deadly sword to wield in battle, a master smith will use secrets of his craft to smelt choice iron into steel, forge steel into tempered blade, then balance, hone and haft the blade to the best of his art. Similarly, a wizard may utilize the secrets of his craft to forge a sword from starfire and incantations. Both swords seem magic to some club-swinging apeman, such as legend places on lands unknown to our civilization, but clearly one is born of science, the other spawned by sorcery. I leave it to you to judge which weapon would prove more potent."

"I'll trust to honest steel," snapped Teres, angered by Gerwein's gibes. "I've heard the legends of your magic swords, and they seem to serve their masters ill enough by the saga's end!"

"She took me literally," breathed Gerwein in polite wonder.

"I don't consider myself untutored," broke in Dribeck, himself annoyed. "Now that you've made your point, where does it lead us?"

"Your pardon, milord. It leads to a war of science against sorcery. And to our advantage, we understand something of the principles of Krelran science, while I doubt Kane is greatly acquainted with the sorcerous powers of Shenan."

"I'd not care to stake my life on that," Dribeck warned.

"But then you are. The important thing is that Krelran science borders on realms we humans consider sorcery--although perhaps my analogy of the savage persists. Science has laws; magic obeys laws. The source of the power each draws upon is different--or is it, if we question far enough? Matters too devious for our attention today. But what we understand of Bloodstone's power convinces us that it is closely akin to the laws of sorcery, and as such it is within our power to combat Kane through the magic of Shenan.

"This disk, which I see you recognize is not a mirror, was laid in the Temple vaults centuries ago, its use almost forgotten--as with so many other artifacts of our lost glory. It may be the defense you seek against Bloodstone's death beam."

Dribeck considered the metal disk skeptically.

"Lift it," she suggested.

It was chill to his touch--how cold he did not realize until his fingertips came away with stinging white stigmata. With painful effort he hooked his grip beneath an edge, and while its mass should not have been more than a few tens of pounds, the disk of unknown metal seemed to weigh as much as the stout oak table.

Her laughter was even colder. "A simulacrum, it would appear. We have rediscovered its secret, and it may be that Kane will soon find the power of Bloodstone is not invincible. And there is much else we have learned, which will dismay Kane when the battle begins. Of course, the rituals are complex, for the forces involved are of a major order. We will require time, many items that we know where to find.

"You will have to revoke the ban on human sacrifice, however, unless you wish to battle Kane with swords alone. Don't look so grim, milord. We also know where to find our virgins--frail blooms we've nurtured since birth. The details will not concern you; it is enough that no child known beyond these walls will die."

Grimly Dribeck speculated as to why the Temple maintained such an unspeakable reserve, when human sacrifice had long been forbidden... and how they had obtained the infants originally. Even less pleasant was consideration of the payment which the Temple would demand for their intervention. The line of thought sickened him, tainting the hope he had begun to experience. But what choice was there?

"I'm wondering what you mean to gain from this, Gerwein," he somberly conceded. "Altruism is not characteristic of the Temple, so I know you aren't helping me out of love for Selonari."

Gerwein might have been discussing the setting of a banquet table. "I'm not naive either, Dribeck. I'll expect an end to your obsessive attempts to tax the Temple, of course. Otherwise I won't demand any political concessions or promises that I know you'll renege on once the danger is past.

"Let the magic of Shenan's daughters save our land from the dread fate Kane intends for us. I think the people will remember well by whose hands they were spared. And I think they will be less enthusiastic for your calculating attacks upon our return to power after this. The game, as you well know, milord, is called prestige."

XXIII

Giants in the Dark Sky

"There's death in the air, and the men feel its breath," observed Dribeck dismally. "This is unlike the prelude to any battle I've ever fought."

The lord of Selonari stood at the sinking shores of Kranor-Rill as light faded. The familiar echoes of axes and shovels and the rumble of fighting men making camp were reassuring, although the usual raucous shouts seemed muffled and sober beneath the pall of unknown dread. Taking with him every man who would bear a weapon, Dribeck had begun his march south the dawn following his conference with Gerwein. Final preparations had taken little time, since he had already gathered his army to him, and the men were held at battle ready. By the close of the third day, their encampment was pitched and respectably fortified, a great wedge with apex positioned at the causeway's terminus.

"There's little joy in a battle where black sorcery and alien science struggle like giants in the dark sky and brave men become no more than scurrying ants who die unnoticed beneath their tread," Teres responded somberly. She and Dribeck sought out one another's company these days, finding solace in their companionship. An unspoken admiration had grown between the two--so different in temperament, but alike in that both were outsiders in their social order.

Teres thought of herself now as ruler of Breimen, nor did the hundred or more refugees who joined her banner dispute her leadership--although it was questionable whether her legacy was anything greater than a pile of ruins. If she lived through this battle, if Bloodstone were destroyed... then she meant to see to Breimen. But first she must try to avenge its fall.

"Our chance of victory may hinge on Kane's attacking us," Dribeck again pointed out. "Here Gerwein's sorcery may offer protection from Kane's energy blasts--at least the men are willing to gamble on it. If we have to besiege Arellarti, I don't know how much help she can give us."

He threw a worn glance over the forest camp, with its earth and timber bulwarks, lines of tents,

swarming knots of soldiers. Cook fires were just starting to twinkle beneath the darkening trees. "I doubt that Kane has any reliable means to reconnoiter--much beyond knowing we're here. His toads can't mingle with the men, and I'd like to think no human has sunk low enough to spy for him. Aside from its military merit, I'm hoping this wedge formation will give him an inaccurate profile of our true strength. If we can play upon his confidence in his own power, it may be he'll decide to attack first and avoid the possibility of our projected siege wreaking havoc upon the city he's gone to such pains to restore."

"Think Kane will attack tonight?" queried Crempra, who had wandered over with Asbraln, the latter a fierce and aged eagle in battle gear that had last seen combat a decade ago.

"Reasonable to expect--if he'll attack at all," Dribeck concluded. "The longer he waits, the stronger we can build our fortifications. Besides, he's a creature of the night, and the darkness will work in favor of the Rillyti. Although I doubt they can outflank us in our position, the swamp creatures prefer stealth to direct confrontation. He planned his attack on Breimen to occur before dawn, remember."

"At night, when Ommem's power ebbs to its lowest," commented Teres. "Kane is no stranger to the occult world; it may be he thought to counter any appeal my city might have made to the shining god of Wollendan. If so, this night is the dark of the moon--the time when Kane hinted Bloodstone's power was greatest. How will your moon goddess Shenan serve you tonight?"

"Gerwein warned us that the time is not propitious, but that's beyond us. However, she still believes their magic will be potent." Dribeck looked toward the tents of the priestesses.

Teres followed his gaze. With surprising efficiency, the daughters of Shenan had reorganized the voluminous paraphernalia with which they had loaded several wagons to overturning. Their every requirement was immediately fulfilled by order of Lord Dribeck, and a small knoll had been cleared of trees for them. Soldiers labored to set up their tents and equipment, surrounded by busy feminine figures clad in varying styles from the simple tunics of acolytes to the more elegant gowns of the ranking priestesses. At the peak of the knoll, struggling workmen were hoisting the eerie metal disk to its mounting place atop a low stone altar. The altar of dark, unflawed stone had been transported from the Temple's depths--whose vaults had yielded other things, as well, that were strangers to the light of day.

Teres frowned at the pale-skinned maidens whom the priestesses quickly hustled into the tents, leading them by the manacles which linked wrists and neck. Their steps were resigned, but their blinking eyes mirrored fear. "And we declare our cause more just than Kane's!" she spat in disgust. "I wonder if our victory will be worth its cost!"

Dribeck's face was determined, although there was dismay in his eyes. "As you've said, there's little joy in this battle. Our weapons must be iniquitous if we are to avert a greater evil still."

The twilight deepened, merged into night. Cordons of sentries patrolled nervously. Nor did sleep come to the encampment, where uneasy soldiers made whispers as they honed steel. The demons of battle were stirring the night breeze with their leathery wings, and there was not a man who did not sense the building tension.

"He comes!" breathed Gerwein, her eyes glazed with concentration, and no man questioned her knowledge. "Drawn by the scent of your sorcery," mused Teres half aloud, hackles tingling at the weird spectacle which unfolded before them.

The torches flashed and flared. Rippling like pennants in the chill breeze were the priestesses' silken robes. Tents flapped like angry wings beyond the torch-lit circle. Teres shivered, not entirely from the

wind, yet with battle imminent, she disdained the warm but hampering folds of her cloak. Dribeck spoke softly to Aion, who left to attend to the lighting of bonfires erected along the fringes of Kranor-Rill.

Tied across the altar, the naked girl writhed without hope. She could not be much past her mid-teens--an innocent, frail flower nurtured in the Temple's secret halls, to be plucked at the moment her keepers judged the bloom to be ready. The fear had left her now, and she seemed to lie entranced by the priestess's rising chant. Teres tried to console herself with the thought that this girl had never really known life, but the revulsion she felt did not diminish. The girl had never uttered a cry.

Higher, more insistent, rang the incantation, now in a language Teres had never before heard. Gerwein's slim fingers dashed curious substances into the flaming brazier, which oozed bittersweet vapors that curled like mist over the priestesses' contorted dance. The girl lay still, seemingly asleep--but for the too rapid rise and fall of her breasts. Gerwein tossed a final spray of powder into the flame, then with a harsh cry drove her fist to just short of the girl's left breast, though Teres would have sworn her hand was empty. The sacrifice's eyes started wide, her mouth convulsed into a silent scream, her body strained against the fetters--and in that instant the brazier spat a shower of sparks and went out!

The metal disk had suddenly blazed luminous in that moment. A ghostly streamer of light, shining from its pale surface, fell upon the contorted sacrifice. For a second it enswathed her staring figure; a phantom shape seemed to swirl through the luminance. Softly the wraith of light withdrew from the girl, withdrew into the circle of polished metal, now glowing brightly. Gold, pale light of death. How like the moon, thought Teres in awe.

On the altar lay the lifeless husk of a girl. Gerwein's lovely face bore a cold, cruel smile of triumph, though she was perhaps a trifle shaken by her spell.

Shouts of alarm sounded from the sentries.

"Now let your sorcery protect us, if it can!" gritted Dribeck as he rushed to lead his men. A cordon of Temple guards closed a shield about the priestesses' knoll.

The effulgence of Arellarti was even brighter, Teres observed--a baleful green luminescence through the ever present mists. Like a ribbon of clotting blood, even the stones of the causeway radiated with pulsant light. Through the fog she could see hulking shapes that shambled along the uncanny roadway, dark shadows against the crimson radiance.

Warning shouts from close at hand. The flaring bonfires exposed scores of the monstrous batrachians rising from the muck and slime of the swamp. Kane had deployed his minions in a stealthy advance. Now, as they swept onto the forest earth, he brought up his main column to follow the initial surprise with crushing force.

"There are your targets!" bellowed Crempra's strident voice. "Against the light! Give it to them now!" Questing arrows hissed through the night.

Roars of pain and of rage told of the archers' accuracy, even when the darkness cloaked the bite of their shafts. Murderous swords raised, the Rillyti emerged from the swamp in great leaping strides. Arrows rattled and streaked across their gleaming armor, penetrating only with a direct hit at close range, while others lodged with crippling effect in the tough hide of exposed limbs.

"Try to hit their eyes!" advised Crempra, noting the luminous reflection of their widened pupils in the firelight. His arrow flew true to its mark and brought a Rillyti crashing to the mud, clawing at the

intolerable agony that lanced through its brain.

To the bulwarks the swamp creatures rushed, oblivious of the fallen in their lust to kill. With fierce bellows they struck the barrier and vaulted over in powerful bounds. Men died beneath their alien-forged blades or answered their threat with equally deadly steel.

Quickly Crempra pulled back his archers from the overrun trenchline to give way to the heavy infantry that surged forward to halt the onrushing Rillyti. A venom-coated spear tugged at his sleeve. His heart caught in fear until he made certain his arm bore no scratch. Gingerly he cut away the tainted area of torn cloth, then hurried to reposition his archers.

From the causeway, the main bulk of the Rillyti horde was issuing into the forest. There the point of the wedge confronted them, and intense fighting raged in seesaw fashion. The archers maintained withering fire onto the lustrous roadway, taking heavy toll despite the bronze alloy armor of the amphibians. But as increasing numbers of the Rillyti gained the high ground, supported by those who had spread out through the swamp, combat along the apex of the wedge waxed fierce and bloody. Each time the batrachians appeared on the verge of overrunning the line of fortification, a fresh surge of steel and sinew would drive them back again over the red litter of death. In the howling melee, the archers were helpless, and further advance by the Rillyti threatened to push them beyond bowshot of the causeway.

Something strange and deadly strode down the causeway. A demon of green flame shimmered through the mists and struck terror in three thousand hearts with the dread promise of searing death. Arrows touched the eerie figure without halting his inexorable advance. The Rillyti roared welcome, drew away from the beleaguered encampment.

Kane had come. The Master of Bloodstone had come to destroy those who dared challenge his power. And behind him marched the main force of his inhuman army, held in reserve while his vanguard tested Dribeck's defenses.

Kane extended his left arm, and courage failed the warriors along the bulwarks. Desperately they fled the ground they had so bravely contested a moment before. A lance of destroying energy hurled itself from his flame-wreathed fist. With a thunderous concussion, the front line of Dribeck's fortifications leaped into the air, showering the night sky with a hail of smouldering fragments and baked clods of earth. Those who had not fled shrieked in final brief agony as the emerald lash fell upon them. Again the terror of ancient Earth reached out its incandescent claws to claim the souls of men in its pitiless fury.

Confident in his power, Kane stalked forward. This night he meant to crush all ordered resistance within this region--to extend his rule of fear across the conquered city-states. Once it became certain that to resist Bloodstone was to die, Kane expected to gather an army of men to replace the Rillyti, warriors whose allegiance would follow the tide of victory.

Bloodstone whispered that it was only hours from the fulfillment of its design. Only a few days had been needed to mount its energy potential to an even higher level than before commencement of the attack on Breimen. Under these conditions, even while he sensed the presence of sorcery, recognized that Dribeck's position was far stronger here than were he to besiege Arellarti, Kane in his arrogance determined to annihilate the Selonari force on its own terms. This was to be an object lesson in the futility of resistance to Bloodstone's incalculable might.

The Selonari had thrown up hasty fortifications, which checked the Rillyti thrust for the initial moment. The Master of Bloodstone intended to obliterate the entire forest encampment with his searing blasts of energy and to loose his ravaging batrachian army upon the disordered survivors. The dread lance of

flame shot forth from the ring, and the jutting prow of bulwarks flared into withering destruction.

A weird and unexpected barrier abruptly stood before him. In a soaring arc, the sorcerous disk lofted itself across the embattled encampment, seeking the alien force in obedience to the priestesses' conjuration. No visible agency moved the shining disk; like a miniature image of the moon, it swung across the nighted sky, hovering at the height of a tall man to obstruct Kane's passage.

Kane paused, for a second uncertain. Dead-white as the full moon of winter, the cold circle of light hung in the air before him, a challenge to his advance. Here loomed sorcery, potent sorcery whose nature was unknown to Kane. That its presence threatened him was undeniable, but the character and the potential of the menace he could not guess.

Destroy it! came the sneering whisper to his mind.

No longer hesitant, Kane struck. A bolt of shimmering violence streaked from the bloodstone ring and speared the center of the hovering disk.

The circle of light seemed to vibrate, its luminance more brilliant for an instant, like an inconceivable silver gong that when struck, emitted a frequency far beyond human perception. It should have flared into a spewing mass of fused metal. Instead, its burnished surface bore no blemish.

Kane recoiled, his arm weak with numbing chill. The energy screen wavered, almost extinguished. With vampirish greed, the pale disk had absorbed the destroying beam of energy, sucked in the stream of power with a lusting hunger for more. Almost it seemed to reach for him with an awesome thirst.

Feeling the first shadow of alarm, Kane returned to the attack. Again the lance of green fire leaped forth--brighter, more powerful than before. A mighty wall of stone would have been pulverized to molten cinders by the blast, yet the saucer of light only increased its pale brilliance. Prepared for its reaching hunger, Kane's shimmering energy shield braced him against the leech-like force.

Kane retreated, aware of the peril he faced. The soldiers had paused in their flight, daring to hope that Selonari's magic promised succor. Shaken by the failure of their god to destroy this sorcerous shield, the Rillyti croaked nervously. The battle held its breath.

Angrily Kane signed to his servants, wondering if physical force might prove effective. Spears and clubs hurtled against the lustrous disk. Its cold effulgence grew more intense, and the missiles that streaked toward its surface silently vanished at the instant of impact. His mind grappled with the dilemma. Thus far, this wizard's shield seemed to be only a defensive weapon--although this made it dangerous enough. Without the destructive power of the bloodstone ring, his inhuman allies would be heavily outnumbered by Dribeck's army. Victory could easily desert him.

The torchlit knoll drew his attention--the brightly patterned pavilions beneath the Temple's pennant, ringed by heavy guard. Fantastically gowned priestesses postured about the glowing altar, their distant chant inaudible, but their attitude of invocation expressive. Recognizing the source of the power which challenged him, Kane responded decisively. Turning from the metal disk, he directed a tremendous flame of energy toward the figures on the knoll.

Faster than thought, the luminous circle flashed before him. The destroying emerald bolt struck the interposing disk and was absorbed into the sorcerous shield. Reeling at the numbing, suctioning force, Kane redirected his attack. Again and again the lance of death leaped from his fist. Relentless as a shadow, the hovering disk followed his every movement, drawing the searing energy into its being with

magnetic certainty.

Kane sensed Bloodstone's bated rage. Destroy it! Tonight my power grows almost limitless!

Determined to end this impasse, Kane turned upon the hanging circle of light. No probing test of strength, no intercepted thrust, this! Now let their sorcery feel the awesome might of Bloodstone!

A blinding torrent of coruscating power poured from Kane's fist, energy far greater than that which had shattered Malchion's fortress, beyond that which had blasted a deep channel through the width of Kranor-Rill. Into the hovering disk tore the full destructive force of Bloodstone. Kane vanished in the consuming flow of energy--a humanoid point of incandescence that stood at the gate of this devastating release of unimaginable power.

Incredibly, the metal disk withstood the onslaught, defied a continuous beam of destructive force whose diameter was greater than that of the pale saucer. Now indeed it seemed a diminutive simulacrum of the moon. Its dead-pale light waxed brighter and brighter--reached out. Was the disk not growing in size as well?

Suddenly it came to Kane that the luminous disk was not merely absorbing the energy blasts--it fed upon them! Bloodstone's incalculable energies were not overwhelming it--rather, the simulacrum was drawing power from the rays. Like an inconceivable vampire, the disk sucked in the cosmic energies of Bloodstone, grew larger, brighter, more powerful. Hungrier.

Its silver-white luminescence crept toward Kane, reached out for him, as the blinding disk drew closer, closer; ravaging down the torrent of energy that fed its lust. Kane felt the cold brush of its caress now; even through the energy web, he felt its deadly, devouring chill. The pale light of a demon moon swept over him, relentlessly seeking to engulf him in its consuming vortex.

Kane cried out. Bloodstone understood the trap into which it had fallen--knew this vampirish simulacrum was feeding on the very power that should have destroyed...

With shattering finality, the shrieking barrage of energy ceased. The explosive silence was a shock; eyes blinded by the incandescent torrent saw painful afterimages, stars of blackness.

The moon disk hung alone on the causeway. Of the Master of Bloodstone there was no trace.

"What happened?" demanded Dribeck. "Is Kane dead?"

"If not dead, then defeated... for the moment," Teres put forward grimly. "I think Bloodstone snatched him back to Arellarti at the last instant--Kane mentioned that the causeway is an extension of Bloodstone's power radius. If so, we'll likely see more of Kane before the night is spent."

Dribeck glanced toward the hovering moon disk. "If he returns, our shield awaits him. For now, his army still threatens us."

Leaderless, the Rillyti had shaken off their stunned hesitation, so that once more they pressed their assault. Fearful to pass close to the luminous disk which had defeated their master's seemingly invincible power, the batrachians clambered from the causeway short of the menacing light and churned through the fringe of the morass to reach the dry ground. Purposefully they advanced, the fearsome legions of Kranor-Rill, obedient to Bloodstone's silent command.

Now the combat surged in fury. Men poured back to the yet smoking ruins of the bulwarks, blades slashing with a fierce will. The power of Bloodstone was broken; the all-conquering bolts of destruction had been defeated by the magic of their goddess. After the banishment of such horror, near hysteria gripped the soldiers. Even the once terrifying Rillyti seemed no more than misshapen, bestial swordsmen after this cataclysmic confrontation of alien science and dread sorcery.

No milling rabble of sleep-fogged, unprepared soldiers, no fear-crazed mob, unmanned by Bloodstone's murderous power. These were battle-ready troops, fully armed and fighting with feral spirit, from seasoned veteran to fuzz-cheeked youth. The Rillyti now were committed to desperate combat, pitted against men who fought for more than life--who battled to preserve their land and people from Bloodstone's evil shadow.

To the smouldering bulwarks the batrachians rushed, their golden blades aflame with hatred for mankind. In their savage brains burned the unrelenting command: Kill the human intruders! Kill the soft-fleshed weaklings! Kill them all!

The struggle swept over the sundered fortifications and drove the men back as ever more Rillyti lurched from the swamp. Armored as they were, their weapons of deadlier reach than the blades of men, the bufanoid killers tore through the line of soldiers like blood-lusting devils. Their greater stature, their inhuman strength--coupled with a total disregard for their personal safety--made the creatures the equal of any four human warriors.

Steel against alien bronze! Steaming human gore clotted with cool bufanoid blood in spreading stigmata across the torn earth. The soldiers fought doggedly, attacking the amphibians in small bands, while the Rillyti battled each for himself. To the humans was the advantage of intelligence over the bestial savages, and they were further aided by their greater agility. The awkward amphibians were unstoppable in head-on combat, when their powerful slashes could batter down any guard, split a man half in two. But if their vicious lunges could be evaded, a quick blade might thrust deep and recover before the creature could parry. Once the strategy proved itself, soldiers harried the towering monsters like a snapping, snarling pack, engaged their weapons long enough to let another man swing a hamstringing blow. Crippled, not long did a batrachian flop upon the forest earth before vengeful blades hacked out its life.

In uncanny, desperate battle the degenerate remnants of an elder race--one that had mastered the stars--locked in mortal strife with the young race who boasted to be Earth's new masters. In darkness they fought, beneath the deeper shadow of the forest, where the wan light of the stars, the smoky flare of the fires dared not creep. Chaos ruled the battlefield as combatants slashed blindly, swinging wild blows, dying from unseen wounds. Here the Rillyti had an edge, for their bulging eyes pierced the darkness more surely than human sight. But their looming bulk could not be mistaken, even in the near absence of light. In blind ferocity man grappled batrachian, slew or was slain. The ground became strewn with the fallen, though no man knew for certain the number of the dead, nor witnessed the manner of their passing.

Crempra had scrambled up a tree early in the strife, and from this vantage he could view such of the swirling struggle as could be discerned. Dribeck's nimble cousin was an indifferent swordsman, and the roaring melee was not to his liking. Five quivers of arrows dangling in near reach, he braced himself on his perch and loosed his bow with deadly effect on any Rillyti unlucky enough to enter the light of the bonfires.

So it happened that the gigantic batrachian whose half-deflected stroke had driven Teres to her knees in a daze halted its killing blow at the top of its arc and howled in death agony as a feathered shaft spouted black ichor from its eye. Teres rolled away from the toppling monster, scarcely taking time to wonder at this last-instant succor.

The harried remnants of her soldiers closed about her once again, while she shook the fog from her head and recovered her sword. The blade was sticky with bufanoid gore, and the shield she bore was chopped and beaten. Only her sudden speed had spared her life in numerous duels with shambling assailants thrice her weight. Undaunted by yet another brush with death, she cursed her men for pausing to rest when the murderers of their nation waited to die. Her words spurred them on. Led by this vengeful she-wolf--whose snarling face showed the scar of past combat, but no shadow of the fatigue that tortured them now--the haggard handful of Breimen's perished army stormed back into the struggle.

Dribeck fought shoulder to shoulder with Asbraln, who made it evident that he considered Selonari's lord an unblooded stripling consigned to his protection. There was yet firm strength in the aged shoulders--or Dribeck had always thought of him as aged--and the doughty chamberlain swung his archaic two-handed broadsword with greater skill than Dribeck could equal. The younger man forgot his chagrin when twice Asbraln's heavier weapon struck back the Rillyti blade that would have ripped Dribeck apart.

The Selonari lord had waded into the thick of the battle, his personal guard thinning as the fighting roared and clashed through the night. Strategy? Only to kill--to kill your foe before you died in his place. There could be no other strategy; the darkness cloaked this war to the death, and with both forces totally committed, it was a grappling contest of brutal ferocity. Dribeck loathed the primitive savagery of the battle--it offended his reasoning nature. But his mind now abandoned its concern with tactics, so that he fought with the instinctive logic of survival.

Who lived? Who lay dead? The living were anonymous writhing shapes in the darkness nearby, bestial curses and yells beyond the close perimeter of vision. The dead--they were the limp and slippery debris that rolled beneath your boot. Only where the priestesses' knoll shed a circle of light could a fair glimpse of the battle be caught. There, Dribeck noted in relief, the cordon of soldiers still formed an unbroken ring, bulwarked now by scores of the slain.

Long ago he had planned this battle with care, counted the numbers, directed the preparations. Then it had seemed that his army well outnumbered Kane's minions, that it was only a matter of tempting Kane to come to him, that without Bloodstone the battle would be fought on human terms. But this smothering darkness made victory an invisible prize, and to know whose hand now closed upon it required speculation for which he had no time. The puddles of light gave no more than tormenting hints. For all Dribeck could be certain, he and his men battled alone, an island lost in the Rillyti tide.

Asbraln staggered and fell back beneath an amphibian's charge. His broadsword rang as it blocked the descending blade of bronze, but the man was winded. Automatically Dribeck lashed out his sword and severed the webbed fist halfway up the forearm. The creature howled, blinded him with its spurting blood, and as Dribeck hesitated, the spear in its other hand skittered past his shield. Its point had force enough behind it to tear through the mail tunic and gash his twisting side.

With a gasp of dread, Asbraln laid open the Rillyti's belly with an upward thrust through its crotch. Ignoring the monster's death throes, the chamberlain clutched his lord's shoulders. The other heard Asbraln cry out the name of Dribeck's father, whose name the older man seldom spoke. "The spear! Milord, you're a dead man!" groaned Asbraln.

Dribeck wiped the stinging blood from his eyes, dully waited for the first searing lincination of the Rillyti venom to creep through his limbs. But fatigue was the only agony, and the shallow gash on his ribs seemed less a pain than this breathless weariness. His men were watching him in stunned pity. It seemed appropriate that his final words should be such to stir future generations, if he could utter something

immortal before consciousness left him. "Well, damn it," he muttered, unable to compose his thoughts.

Asbraln had recovered the spear, raised it in grief-clumsy hands. He laughed in a choked rumble. "One of our own," he announced, pointing to the iron spear-point.

With a shrug, Dribeck dismissed the incident. Constant confrontation with violent death this night left him too numb to sense any realistic emotion. Logically he understood that chance had again spared him a grisly death, but he was too drained to feel any particular relief.

The sounds of combat were fading. It came to him that his panting company had stood for several minutes, slumped from fatigue, binding their wounds. No Rillyti had challenged them. Voices of others sounded close at hand. Torches were flickering across the tangled battlefield.

"I think," Dribeck hazarded, "that once it gets light, we may discover that we've won this battle."

But there were other eyes that looked upon the conflict, alien sight to which the darkness posed no barrier--a malevolent force that pierced the night and perceived the torn and death-laden battlefield. It saw that its army had been overcome, its fierce legions strewn upon the bodies of their slayers, scattered in flight into the fastnesses of the swamp.

The Rillyti are broken. Your power is checked. How shall I defend these walls when the sun brings their army against us?

The sun will find none but the dead. In a few hours all shall be completed. Already my being courses with the driving energies of the cosmos, so that their puny sorceries have only for a moment thwarted me. Did you imagine that I have revealed to you all of the power that lies within me? Now you shall know, arrogant man, that there are yet secrets which defy even your conception!

Now through the forest swept the army of Selonari. Carrying torches, they searched among the trees, pausing amidst the piled dead to give aid to a wounded comrade, to dispatch a floundering batrachian. Outnumbered beyond hope, the fragmented Rillyti army slunk away into Kranor-Rill, driven like scum before a cresting wave. Desperate knots of men and bufanoids yet struggled in the darkness, but when their fellows came upon them, steel gleamed in a score of hands, and the duel became a slaughter. For all that, the human advance was not an unbroken flow. Countless vortices of swirling violence marked the suicidal stand of some blood-maddened batrachian, whose savage blade might rend and tear, long after it seemed possible for any creature so wounded to fight on.

Such islands of strife, however vicious, could not stem the crushing advance. Pressing upon the swampland's perimeter, the worn but jubilant troops watched the last of the Rillyti turn and flee, their mindless ferocity finally mastered by human might.

Then struck gibbering horror--inconceivable terror that drove sanity from the frightened souls of men. Phantom shapes were emerging from the mist, streaming along the sullen stones of the causeway--an army of maggots vomited over the dead tongue of some impossible serpent. Spectral figures of green flame they were--shadowy creatures whose substance was the coruseant energy of Bloodstone. Like a rippling point of fire they flowed across the rubrous stone, an unending army of captive souls.

The shadow creatures of Bloodstone. A demon army of shimmering flame--monstrous shapes of things dead, but denied the freedom of dissolution. Their semi-translucent bodies took strange and horrid forms, some terrifying in that their alien figuration was of ages beyond human memory, others equally abominable for the dread familiarity of their aspect.

There were creatures who resembled the Rillyti, but of taller, more erect stature, with limbs of more subtle build, and peaked skulls of intelligent mien. Reptilian. These were the Krelran, the centuries-dead builders of Arellarti. Nor were theirs the only shades of the vanished races of elder Earth. Octopoid monsters writhed forward; clearly the six thick tentacles which slithered down from bloated trunks provided unnatural locomotion for creatures that hinted of the ocean's black depths; two whiplike tentacles extended menacingly from the humped shoulders of each trunk, above which sprouted a rounded head bearing six lidless eyes like a coronet, and a toothless maw that gaped like a death wound where the face should have been. Other bizarre shapes, fewer in number, joined the onrushing horde. Chitinous spider-like creatures, large as a horse, clicked across the stones on four spindly limbs. Four more such limbs thrust forward, metallic claws clashing, from the upward-curling cephalothorax. Fluttering through the air on moth wings of fire came humanoid beings whose angular bodies were clothed in shaggy scales, whose faces were set with great compound eyes like glittering mosaic. Hairy beasts like misshapen apes slouched forward, long arms swinging to the ground.

Here were creatures of the distant past, shadow slaves of Bloodstone since the dawn of Arellarti. They seemed to be fiery wraiths in the life image of their millennia-lost bodies. Such was not so for the teeming bulk of their army. These were shapes which appeared withered and twisted with gnawing decay-distorted, skeletal things, molded of the same shimmering energy, which gave them the aspect of forms enshrouded by devouring flame. Most of these corpse-like shapes were batrachian, an eerie devolution ranging from the elder Krelran to the bestial Rillyti. But many were the spectral images of human lamia, whose energy-wreathed silhouettes included brutish dawn races, along with scores of men, women, even children, of the present peoples of the Southern Lands.

For Kane had not been altogether accurate when he dismissed the Rillyti sacrifices as useless superstition. These were creatures whose souls had been stolen by Bloodstone's searing tongue of energy, enslaved throughout the centuries, imperfect shades of those whose souls had been offered to the monolithic crystal as it lay dormant--crudely fed to their god through the Rillyti's unholy sacrificial rites. But there were many other shapes in this army of abominations; and these were somehow the most terrifying of all.

Marching shoulder to alien shoulder with these creatures of horror came the naked figures of many men--those whose souls Bloodstone had captured through the destroying power of Kane's ring. Horribly familiar were many of these shapes, some whose blackened bodies yet lay warm upon the blasted bulwarks. The dead of Breimen were there--men who had died from the searing energies of the bloodstone ring--as were the soldiers of Selonari who had fallen when Teres revealed Kane's treachery to Dribeck. Death at the burning touch of Bloodstone was far more hideous than ever it had seemed, for those who died under its caress of shimmering energy fed their souls to its unhallowed power. Bloodstone thirsted for organic life as well as cosmic force...

Teres shuddered with loathing. Among the dread horde of Bloodstone's shadow slaves she had recognized the glowing profile of Lutwion. And although full realization of this horror now menacing them did not come at once, fragments of understanding suggested themselves to the men, threatened to plunge frightened reason into the protective darkness of insanity.

Through the oily mists rushed the lamia of writhing energy--naked, silent, eyes staring pools of flame. Their numbers were myriad, but they bore no weapons save the outstretched limbs that blazed with glimmering fire. Shaking off its pall of fear, Dribeck's army awaited this new horror; a thousand grim faces prepared to learn whether steel could master these dread specters of elder evil.

In a sudden wave they burst upon the awestricken men, a grotesque spume of emerald and

crimson-veined shadows. Swords slashed and thrust into their macabre vanguard. Bodies that appeared phantasmal now proved substantial. Resistance met the searching blades, though not the touch of flesh. Steel sheared through the wraithlike figures with the sickening feel of clinging jelly-gristle-boned, repulsive substance whose consistency suggested an unthinkable congealment of noxious mist. Bloodless phantoms with rubbery strength in their limbs, fangs and talons like sharpened horn.

The shadow creatures would not die.

They yielded to steel's ripping might, but they would not fall. With mindless fury they threw themselves upon the soldiers, submitted to their desperate blades with awful disregard for individual preservation. Swords sliced through them, their wielders overbalanced by the uncanny resistance the weapons struck. But grievous wounds saw neither blood nor nameless ichor, nor yet did the creatures falter in the face of any number of mortal wounds.

Bloodstone's enormously amplified power, now spiraling to impossible limits with each passing moment, had achieved the cosmic transmutation of energy into matter. The crystal entity had clothed its captive souls in a semblance of matter--an inconceivable substance of primal nature, whose characteristics were neither wholly of matter nor of energy--a blasphemous caricature of life, which, not living, could not die.

Teres had led her decimated company to the front line of this hideous attack. Yelling in revulsion as she thrust, she plunged her sword into the unfeeling breast of one who had been her countryman days before. The blade darted through, then back. Barely staggering from its impact, the specter reached for her. Teres recoiled in dismay and slashed at the grasping arms. The blade sprang through, severed one entire arm and the other at elbow. The butchered limbs dropped, but her assailant stepped closer, bloodless stumps waving. With a burst of loathing, she lopped off the creature's head. It bounded to the earth, but the decapitated figure yet groped for her. She froze for a stunned instant, and the apparition lunged for her. Teres sidestepped and slashed through its thigh. The leg fell away, precipitating the maimed shadow creature to the ground. Blindly it hunched forward on its belly.

In horror Teres saw that her comrades were likewise beset. A buffet knocked her sprawling, as one of the moth-winged creatures soared past. Behind her the lepidopteran struck, and bore a soldier to the earth. Its taloned hands gashed his face and throat as they grappled, while the man's blade stabbed ineffectually. Another shadow creature--a withered batrachian shape--reached down for her. Teres slashed for its legs and rolled agilely from under its toppling weight. There was nothing insubstantial about these monsters' strength, she realized, hacking the lamia apart as from the ground it clutched for her.

Another human shade--did it seem familiar? Wildly Teres swung her blade in a downward arc, clove through head and shoulders, through chest to belly level, before the rubbery flesh stopped the steel. She yanked free her sword, then doubted her eyes... as the two segments swung back together, sealing the ghastly wound. Setting her teeth, she chopped out again and dismembered the thing.

The shimmering form of a young girl stalked toward her. Teres remembered her near death upon Bloodstone's altar, and horror stayed her arm. Something at that instant clutched her boot, and Teres looked down to see a dismembered hand had caught her ankle in vise-like grip. The ground was crawling with severed segments of the shadow creatures, writhing blindly forward with maniacal intent. She hacked at the repellent thing, parted forearm from wrist; spider-like, the hand climbed onto her calf. Then the girlish apparition leaped upon her, clawed fingers raking for her eyes, grappling for her sword. Bitterly Teres repented her involuntary hesitance and fended off the shadow girl's attack. There was cold strength in the arm that sought to wrest free Teres's blade, and the claws that gouged her cheek were dangerously real. Twisting, Teres planted a boot in her assailant's belly and drove her back. The jolt dislodged the scrambling hand from its purchase on her thigh, and for a moment Teres tore free. Pitiless now, her

sword slashed again and again to dash the decay-pocked specter piecemeal upon the earth.

Retreating to regain her breath and conquer the nausea that shook her, Teres looked upon a battlefield of nightmarish terror. In a seething stream, the shadow creatures of Bloodstone stormed across the burning roadway. Surely only a small fraction of their myriads had engaged the human army thus far, and there seemed no way the thousand or more warriors could long stand in the face of such overwhelming numbers. Already they were falling back beneath the irresistible pressure of the energy phantoms' relentless advance.

Arrows, spears were useless. Fear-driven swords were taking a terrific toll on the weaponless foe, but to what avail? Hacked and dismembered, the shadow creatures continued to wriggle forward, driving the soldiers before them. The forest floor was alight with loathsome scuttling things. A malignant intelligence directed their onslaught, so that even the disjointed fragments conspired against the embattled humans. A lepidopterous torso, limbless and decapitated, yet fluttered about the line of combat, striking the unwary onto the outstretched grasp of the enemy, until someone sent it plummeting on sheared wings. Near her, a fallen soldier died with throat ripped open by the vomerine fangs of a severed bufanoid head. A mangled torso rolled beneath another soldier's retreating step and pitched him onto the horror-covered ground. An ape-like shade, sundered across its belly, continued its horrid advance with torso swinging between hairy arms, while its hips shambled off at another angle.

Men were dying under the shadow creatures' assault. The glowing figures could not be killed--only disabled through arduous tactics, which drew a man's efforts while more of the creatures rushed upon him. The demented wraiths were swarming over the desperate warriors--clawing, biting, choking the life from their victims, oblivious to the wounds that tore their unnatural flesh. The plight of Selonari's army was enough imperiled, with just the human and batrachian phantoms to contend against, but the terrifying presence of these other creatures from Earth's lost antiquity had shattering impact.

The monstrous octopoids were deadliest. Their bulk was over half again that of a man, much of that in the powerful tentacles which lashed out to crush and strangle. Severed, the serpentine tentacles slithered forward like fiery pythons, no whit less dangerous until chopped into stubby fragments. Equally menacing, although few in number, were the arachnoid creatures with their darting speed and chitin-edged claws. The moth-winged specters, also but a few, presented danger in their unexpected attack from the air, while their taloned digits and stabbing mouth parts made them formidable opponents. And the shaggy ape creatures carried strength enough in their slouching frames to rip a man apart.

This then was the hideous battle that raged into the timber--the soldiers yielding ground grudgingly, driven back nonetheless. The relentless onslaught of the shadow creatures slithered over a new litter of bodies, corpses distinguishable from those slain earlier by their mangled aspect. And although dawn was yet hours distant, the night was broken by the eerie, evil luminescence of the shadow hordes.

Teres caught a glimpse of Dribeck in the emerald radiance; the Selonari lord was fighting gamely in the face of blackest defeat. Wanting suddenly to stand beside him, she cut her way through the tireless van of Bloodstone's spectral creatures.

A blade slashed toward her, a clumsy stroke so unexpected she barely did parry. Her astonishment vanished quickly at the new threat as she engaged her opponent's bronze alloy sword, a Rillyti weapon wielded now by a hand that weeks ago was human. Thinking ruefully of the shield she had earlier discarded for long dagger--the shield had been useless against bare-handed assailants--Teres lunged to attack. Her foe parried clumsily; evidently its guiding intelligence was too limited for the intricacies of swordplay. Instinctively she thrust her swordtip through its chest--and almost lost an ear, when the lamia's awkward slash followed what should have been a mortal wound. Teres cursed her momentary

lapse--battle fatigue was dulling her thoughts--and lopped off the extended sword arm. As she methodically disabled the creature, she noted that elsewhere along the line of combat were the phantom shapes taking up fallen Rillyti weapons. Those of steel they left untouched. She grimaced. Even with their clumsy swordplay, the creatures would be deadly opponents, invulnerable as they were to all but wounds that severed completely.

Dribeck went down. A crawling arm, sundered at the shoulder, had clamped webbed fingers upon his ankle. He swore, slashing wildly at the dragging weight, as a man-shaped phantom hurtled upon him. Hindered by the tenacious grasp, Dribeck lost his balance and fell, the shadow creature struggling atop him, hands locked about the man's throat. Dribeck's steel sliced through the glowing arms, and his sudden lunge knocked the unsupported creature away from him. He struggled to his feet, but the strangling hands still closed about his long neck. Fighting for breath, he hacked the forearms off at the wrists-to no effect. In panic Dribeck dropped his blade, clutched the spectral hands in his own, sought to tear them from their choking grip. The rubbery flesh-substance was slippery under his sweaty fingers.

Dribeck's tongue was starting to protrude when Teres reached him. Those who remained of his personal guard were too hard-pressed to note their lord's distress. Despairing of breaking the stranglehold, she set her dagger point between thumb and forefinger and sawed through the tough flesh. Unable to appose, the disjointed segments fell free, and she flung them off into the darkness.

Weak but still conscious, Dribeck staggered to his feet, while Teres beat down the assault of another shadow slave. He retrieved his sword and, supported by Teres, withdrew from the battle to recover his strength.

"My thanks, Teres!" he gasped, massaging his bruised throat. "But I think you may have saved a life that will never see the dawn! The men fight well, but fatigue now tortures us all. One by one, we fall to the ceaseless onslaught of this demon horde--nor do we rise again with the unnatural vitality that our deathless enemy draws upon."

"Will you call retreat?" she suggested. "We can still escape."

Lord Dribeck shook his head wearily. "A useless escape. Kane's power has already exceeded my most pessimistic calculations. Another hour, another day... who can say! Kane boasted that Bloodstone's power would become limitless! It's likely that this battle will be the last chance mankind will ever know to escape the shadow of Bloodstone. While a handful of us survive, I dare not throw away that slim chance of victory!

"We've pushed Kane hard, gained ground on him. We nullified his deadliest weapon, handed his Rillyti army a bloody defeat--and we're taking toll of this phantom horde. I can't count how many men we've lost, but I'm still hoping we can outlast these murderous shadows somehow. Butcher them all to wriggling fragments, and maybe we can walk over the glowing scum to find Arellarti without further guards.

"And there's still Gerwein," he added. The priestesses' knoll thrust like a bastion along the faltering Selonari lines, but the advancing shadow creatures had not overrun it. About the camp of Shenan's daughters, Dribeck had concentrated the bulk of his troops, for he judged that their sorcery might well hold the only chance for victory. Beleaguered as never before, the cordon battled valiantly to withstand the merciless assault. Dribeck could discern Gerwein's tall figure, leading the frantic priestesses through some unguessable incantations. Still white forms, stretched upon the ground, attested to the altar's black hunger. Gerwein, then, had not accepted defeat.

"I have my breath again," declared Dribeck, squaring his lean shoulders. "It's pointless to seek to

maintain our battle line any further, and I don't want the Temple's hill to be cut off. Come on, we'll retract our line to the knoll and make a stand against its base."

Teres did not listen. Her eyes were wide with insupportable horror.

Following her gaze, Dribeck mirrored her fear. The dismembered segments of energy-substance no longer writhed in blind disunion. From the wriggling wake of the shadow slaves' onslaught, impossible monstrosities were taking shape. Disjointed limbs crawled against mangled trunks, pressed together--and were one. Haphazardly at first seemed this terrible union to occur, but now there was demented purpose to the gruesome reanastomoses.

A one-armed torso lurched erect on mismatched legs, clasped against its stub of forearm another arm, severed above elbow, and with this dubiously jointed limb snatched up a rolling head and joined it to its nuchal stump. So it went throughout the battlefield, strewn with this ghastly debris. Little attempt was made to match the component segments, so that inconceivable travesties of coherent life took shape. Human heads and limbs clung to batrachian trunks, and the reverse. Dread-winged conglomerations flopped across the ground, unable to take flight. An apish creature shambled with octopoid tentacles upon its shoulders; a human shape bore spider arms. Many of the depraved recombinations were incapable of erect ambulation, having blindly conjoined with limbs of too great disparity--or fused arms to knees, thighs to shoulders. These thrashed about, powerless to break this outré reconnection, or oblivious to the unnatural mismating.

Other abominations shambled across the forest field that were an even greater outrage to natural order. A hemisected man shape, cloven from shoulder through crotch by a mighty blow, wriggled forward in centipede fashion, an impossible disarray of limbs jutting from its sectioned plane. Most terrible of all were the octopoid creatures, reconnected in a blasphemous, crawling chaos of tentacles, claws, human and amphibian limbs, human heads protruding like cancerous growths from their rubbery flesh. Scarcely less monstrous were the horrid reshaping of the spider creatures. Nor were the snapping heads affixed to disjointed arms good to look upon as they scrambled crab-like over the corpses.

Taking new and frightful shape as they crept onward, these fiery monstrosities of unthinkable configuration inexorably advanced to reinforce the teeming shadow army, whose onslaught threatened to overwhelm the line of warriors with each passing moment.

Lord Dribeck tore his sickened gaze from the crawling horde of madness. "To the priestesses' encampment, then!" he ordered in a shaken voice. "Where I fear we must make our final stand."

Pulling back the men, together they slashed their way toward the knoll. The task seemed all but insurmountable. The hard-pressing ranks of the shadow creatures bore down upon them like engulfing quicksand, clung tenaciously, smothered them with crushing numbers. Even as the Selonari line contracted, they left a trail of mangled bodies embedded in the avalanche of emerald horror.

They had hacked through half the distance to the embattled prominence when final disaster caught them. A sudden surge of the more monstrous shadow slaves overran their withdrawal, smashed through the ranks of battle-worn soldiers. Their line had broken; now the knoll was cut off. Bloodstone's shimmering minions thrust past the breach and streamed through to encircle the fragmented human army.

"We must reach the Temple's knoll!" yelled Dribeck. "Try to cut through to the others!" Desperation added new strength to fatigued limbs, and the rallying warriors closed the rift somewhat. But their endurance was cracking under the unrelenting strain, nor was there a man among them not scratched and gouged by the phantoms' talons, or carrying the deeper wounds of bronze blades. The column

contracted, buttressed against the monsters' rush, but now the spectral shapes enclosed the human ranks, ravaged through the rearguard where the wounded had been taken.

They would not see the dawn, Teres realized, and though she had often thought to die in battle, there was no heroism in being torn apart by these mindless shadow creatures. Recklessly now she fought, too exhausted to curse, but with a feral snarl on her bleeding lips. Ah, for Gwellines--his hooves would wreak havoc amidst these glowing carrion! But the stallion was tethered with the other mounts, deemed useless in this night combat. Wistfully she hoped the horse would be spared; he was about the last vestige of her once settled existence.

Teres went down under clutching arms. Dribeck's sword sliced through her assailant's shoulders, then a misshapen human/bufanoid hybrid leaped upon his turned back. Doggedly he struggled under its weight--the creature's mismatched components made its attack clumsy, albeit vicious. Cutting away the choking fingers, Teres lurched toward him, but staggered as a legless torso trapped her foot in its webbed fist. She turned upon the dismembered trunk, hacking down as it sought to climb her legs. Dribeck had dropped to his knees, now beset by another misshaped foe as well, his sword arm pinned by its grasp. A tentacle lashed out at Teres as she struggled with the crawling hands that ensnared her legs. Her last-instant slash cut through the serpentine coil as it struck for her throat, but a sudden blow from a jointed spider claw stripped the sword from her deadened grip.

She lunged for the fallen blade, stumbled from the dragging anchor that clutched her ankles, and threw herself headlong to seize the blade. Frantically she chopped at the loathsome claws that held her; they would not let her rise. The tentacled monster loomed over her, reached once more for her throat. Teres sliced upward, her last strength failing, and recognized in unbelieving horror that atop the grotesque, multi-limbed arachnoid carapace reposed the head of Lutwion.

Then there was moonlight.

She thought her reeling senses had shattered with madness in that fearful moment. Impossibly, the moon had suddenly turned full. Pale luminance streamed down from its cold, ashen sphere, cast shadows upon the sickened earth.

But it was not the moon that coursed through natural skies--she realized that with wonder. Its luminescence was far too intense. The white brilliance hurt her eyes, struck her upturned face with palpable force. She could sense the unearthly chill of the moonbeam's touch, cold that seemed to leech the warmth from her sweat-soaked skin.

And the globe that shone down upon them was not the dead surface of the moon that mankind knew. There were subtle shapes writhing upon its pale eye. In sudden fear, Teres looked away.

The attack, the relentless advance of the shadow creatures, halted. Their mindless faces seemed to contort with terror as they looked upon this unnatural effulgence.

Teres saw that their emerald flesh-substance was blackening, beginning to slough away in leprous scabs that dwindled while they fluttered to the ground.

The shadow army broke and fled--running, crawling, scurrying, as best they could--retreated from the incredulous humans, fled for the causeway. Although the distance was not great, they would not cross it.

Like vengeful lances the too-brilliant moonbeams stabbed down upon the routed horde. Their unnatural flesh withered and seared under the cold rays, as if they were worms writhing beneath an intolerable heat.

First to go were the wriggling fragments, like blackened slugs as they contorted in agony, crumbled apart and melted into the earth. The larger segments lasted longer, but got no farther. Nor did the creatures who fled on staggering limbs fare much better. Under the pitiless luminescence their charred limbs faltered, and collapsed as the burning decay eroded their substance. As they bucked and rolled across the forest, their death struggles carried them only a little way before dissolution overtook them. A few blindly sought the shadow of the trees, but to no avail; the moonlight seemed to search the fugitives out in defiance of natural law. Some of the monstrous conglomerates of alien and human shadow substance almost reached the foot of the causeway. There the last of them fell, formless blobs of searing, shriveling flesh that gave up their stolen life force in silent agony--collapsed into crumbling mounds of char, melted to a dark stain upon the earth, which slowly faded away into the nothingness from which the shadow slaves were spawned.

Dawn was touching the horizon as the alien moon slowly dimmed. Stunned and bleeding, the remnants of Dribeck's army looked in disbelief for their vanished enemy. And if victory belongs to the survivors, then few were the victors of this nightmare battle.

XXIV

The Final Mask Falls

Gerwein's face had aged ten years during that night.

At dawn the battle-worn survivors had tended their wounded as well as might be, then collapsed upon the forest earth in utter exhaustion. As strength returned, they had searched the field of combat, still too fatigued to bury the uncounted dead. Of the shadow creatures no trace remained, but the earth was heavy with the corpses of men and Rillyti. From this battle there would be raised a row of cairns great as the stony peaks of Serpent's Tail.

The shambles of the encampment was restored to a semblance of order, but far fewer were the tents now spread beneath the rattling victory banner. A watch was posted, strategy discussed tentatively--though with the morning sun above them, the men cared only to draw grateful breath and lick their wounds.

A gaunt Lord Dribeck, his injuries cared for, sat before his pavilion deep in thought. Teres dozed fitfully on a pallet inside. Thigh tightly bandaged, Asbraln rested in the sun--Dribeck had ordered the chamberlain taken from the battle after a deep leg wound incapacitated him. Crempra, who had sprained his ankle falling out of a tree, reposed beside him, basking in the warmth of victory with no apparent

concern for the next day.

Gerwein came to him there. It was a measure of the gravity of her visit, in that she felt compelled to call upon Dribeck: He had hurried to congratulate the high priestess over the sorcerous vanquishment of Bloodstone's shadow horde, only to learn Gerwein was prostrate with exhaustion in the aftermath of her incantations. Leaving word of his gratitude, Dribeck had intended to return to the Temple's encampment after the noon hour, then to discuss his projected siege of Arellarti.

Her proud face was drawn with strain; something that might be fear shone in her magnificent eyes. Her cold disdain seemed broken by some overbearing concern, and she brushed aside his speech of thanks--when once the priestess would have given her soul for this moment. Perhaps she had.

"I must speak with you," she announced in a strange voice.

"Of course," Dribeck acceded. "In my tent, then. These are all who remain of my counselors, so we might as well make it a formal council. We need to consider our next move against Kane, now that his power lies crushed by your magic."

Gerwein pursed her lips in a taunt line, entered the pavilion, and dropped onto a chair. The others followed her within. Starting from her stupor, Teres had her sword half drawn before awareness returned; sheepishly she sat up. One of the priestess's attendants placed in Gerwein's hands a brittle-leafed tome and withdrew silently.

"This is the lost volume to which I made reference on your visit to the Temple archives," Gerwein began, before each had taken his place. "The pages of our crumbling volumes referred to a yet more ancient manuscript which told the full history of Arellarti, of Bloodstone--as far as any man has penetrated its secrets. Parts of this knowledge had been excerpted, appended to the older compendia of our Temple's lore. Thence came the knowledge we used to combat Bloodstone's powers: the secret of its annihilating energy, which is somehow akin to both the energies of the cosmos and of life--vampirish of the living entities whom it destroys. The shadow slaves of Bloodstone--stolen souls whom it enslaved on the plane where elder science merges into sorcery. These were dead creatures invested with a depraved sham-life, and thus they were vulnerable to Shenan's shining wrath, for such mockeries of living death are hateful to the sight of true gods."

She rested the heavy tome upon Dribeck's battered camp table and opened its pages with a gesture. "My sisters discovered this as we were making ready to depart Selonari. It's a palimpsest, or we would have known it earlier. I can't guess its age, although it predates the more than five centuries our people have held these lands. It's written in the Old Tongue, the language of those whose day was before mankind became a race. I think the history must have come from the giants, who ranged far across the dawn Earth and knew many secrets of the elder ages, though someone must have transcribed this, for the giants cared little for writing. One of my parsimonious ancestors, who did not read Old Tongue or else deemed this lore of little value, erased the parchment to record her memoirs. Much of the ancient script is still legible; my sisters restored it somewhat, and I was able to read these lost pages as we journeyed.

"I was disconcerted by what I learned, but in my pride I did not give full credence to these faded lines. It seemed that my sorcery could triumph over this resurrected demon of alien science, despite the sinister insinuations of the manuscript. So I kept silent upon my new wisdom, thinking it would be advantageous to make the disclosure as a dramatic stroke when Kane was vanquished by my magic.

"But the battle went not as I had thought. More potent sorceries were demanded than I had ever planned--you cannot imagine the powers that clashed invisibly, the frightful sacrifices this narrow victory

cost! And now I understand that this ancient writing is not wild exaggeration! That we are aligned against powers of which we have known but a frightened glimpse! That the price of our defeat is far more hideous than ever we had guessed!"

"You mean Kane could indeed conquer the earth?" demanded Dribeck. "Can he enslave all mankind?"

Gerwein laughed bitterly--a sharp, unpleasant sound. "Kane! He knows not what power he has awakened The doom I speak of is a far blacker evil than a world empire with Kane as tyrant--that would mean little more than a change of masters for much of mankind!

"But let me read. I'll translate as well as I can these archaic lines, since I doubt if even Lord Dribeck knows Old Tongue:

"And in that distant age to our world and to this land came Bloodstone, from beyond the stars that shone in the elder night. In flight came Bloodstone, driven before the vast war between its brothers and the races of the stars, who had risen against the dread hunger of the crystal entities, and did battle to sunder the strangling fetters of abominable tyranny which that unnatural race had spread across the stars. Seeking refuge from their anger, Bloodstone determined to dwell upon our world, and with its final stores of energy from the land it blasted a great burning wound, and into this wound flowed the waters of the sea, and there was formed an inland sea, wherein Bloodstone had carved an island, and upon this haven did it come to rest. There in the fastness of its island, Bloodstone directed its Krelran slaves to build for it a fortress city, raised from strange elements that Bloodstone's power had transmuted from certain substances, these it took from the earth and the sea and the air and the fire. Nor was this city as any other the Earth has known, before or since, for its design was not so much structured to give shelter to the crystal and its slaves, but to call down from the stars the limitless energies that were the life force of Bloodstone. Thus did his minions labor long and arduously, giving fullest attention to every minute detail of their master's great design, whether to the precise angles of some gigantic and doorless edifice, or to a tiny etching upon some bizarrely faceted carving. For once this extension of its power lattice could be completed, then could Bloodstone freely drink of those immeasurable energies that hold together the universe, known and unknown, that hold apart this plane of existence from dimensions and from worlds beyond this that we know, that are the life principle of all nature, whether rock or flame or living creature.

"Further, it was the intent of Bloodstone to call out to its brothers beyond the stars, where their danger now was great as the wrath of their enemies, and to summon its crystal race, as many as survived, to come to our world, where their enemies had not followed, and here to descend, and to carry out the dread design from which they had been driven by the power of their enemies. Thus would Bloodstone and its kind have brought down from the stars a monstrous doom upon our world, feeding upon and enslaving the elder races that here dwelled, in the same manner that it treated its Krelran slaves, and no power upon the Earth could deny their might. But the elder races of Earth had knowledge of Bloodstone's evil intent, nor were these other beings without wizardry of their own, some having themselves ridden from the stars on great engines of their devising, some having origins of which we may not speak. The greatest of these, the Scylredi, from their castles beneath the sea, and the Tuhchiso, who dwell in far deserts, and the Brveen, whose home is the cliffs where the Great Serpent's Head drops down upon the salt marshes, then made truce from their smouldering wars, and they made an alliance one with another to destroy the work of Bloodstone. Thereby did follow a mighty and terrible war between these elder races and Bloodstone, and great was the destruction of that fearful combat, despite that Bloodstone was much weakened from its flight and its building of Arellarti, and that its power lattice was not completed, so that it could not draw upon the energies for which it thirsted sorely. Even then it may have been that Bloodstone would have withstood their attack, but when its powers were concentrated to its defense, then did the master of the Krelran, Bloodstone's chief servant, who wielded in a strangely wrought ring upon his fist the dual self of Bloodstone's being, rebel against the slavery in which

Bloodstone held his people, notwithstanding the high station he bore among them. This chief of the Krelran slaves with secret thoughts approached Bloodstone, and manipulated the master controls of the crystal's power structure to cut off that thin stream of energy by which the crystal was nourished, doing this before Bloodstone could once more hold his mind in thrall. And here was Bloodstone vulnerable, for according to its dual nature of crystal and organic life, it could not control its power through itself directly, but only through the agency of its slave, who under Bloodstone's power was both extension and organic identity of the crystal consciousness. No hand but that of its chief slave might command the mechanisms of the control dais and live, nor could Bloodstone destroy its rebellious slave, for he was part of the crystal's life structure. Thereby was Bloodstone crippled before its enemies, and its rebellious servant then sought to flee, with others of his kind, in the great ship that had carried them to our world. But the fury of these elder races spared no work of Bloodstone and followed the fleeing ship, and destroyed it, and with it died the servant of Bloodstone. Thus was the bond of life broken for Bloodstone, and the ring that bore its dual self was lost, and the giant crystal fell dormant within its ravaged city, which the elder races were not able to destroy utterly, as they did the alien ship. For centuries now has Bloodstone lain silent in the ruins of Arellarti, while the great elder races that conquered it have fallen from their ancient state of might, and it is said that Bloodstone lies not dead, but in repose, dreaming of that day when, by an evil miracle, its power may again throw a light of horror upon our Earth."

Gerwein closed the book, pushed it away from her. "It goes on to describe Arellarti, talks about the powers of Bloodstone and the like--the sections which were excerpted and abridged for the volumes we uncovered earlier. The part I translated for you tells us where we stand, though.

"In short, you suggest that Kane's power has been broken. This is doubly false. In truth we speak of Bloodstone's power, for Kane is no more than its pawn. He erred, as did we all, in believing the Krelran had harnessed the power of Bloodstone to serve their race. Our conceit kept us from recognizing on whose neck the shackles truly weighed. And now we realize how little our hollow victory means--if after such losses we can name it victory! While we were barely able to check Bloodstone's attack last night, our strength has been sacrificed for but little gain. We defended our lives--the lives of a few of us--and now what force have we to attack Bloodstone! Yet Bloodstone is no more than a short span of time from the fulfillment of its design and the attainment of power that well may be without limit! Do you think this inconsequential setback we dealt Bloodstone last night could have crippled such might?

"But the final despair is to understand the doom Bloodstone means to wreak upon all mankind--if its horror will not reach even farther! The others of its race shall be summoned, and man shall be a mindless slave to these devouring gods... and what hope is there to break such chains? I believed my pitiful sorceries could defeat Bloodstone, but last night it took the most potent of spells just to withstand its languid thrust! Once it achieves the peak of its power, no magic forces known to man can resist Bloodstone! It took the incalculable strength of three elder-world titans to destroy Bloodstone when its power was at ebb--and even they could not altogether annihilate it!

"Our cause is doomed," she declared quietly. "We are pitted against an enemy whose power truly is beyond our conception. Against such measureless force mankind cannot hope to prevail."

It seemed the dark silence which followed her pronouncement would never be broken. Not even a bird or warrior's shout was heard within the tent. It was as if the pavilion had been hermetically sealed by their despair.

"Let us die in the attempt," said Dribeck at last. The others remained silent. Nor was there any answer they could give.

"I have no more than several hundred men who are fit to march," he continued, his voice unnatural. "Still,

I'll lead them to the walls of Arellarti--though we're but children throwing stones at an ogre's castle. Likely we'll all perish before some new and terrible weapon... before we ever reach the city portals. Yet there's a chance we might fight through--reach Bloodstone's fane--destroy it somehow, I don't know--maybe force Kane to show us how. The odds are not ones I care to ponder, but they seem a far more tempting gamble than to wait for Bloodstone to deal with us as it wills.

"At least the evils of which we know have been vanquished. The shadow army is destroyed, there can't be more than a few score Rillyti skulking about, and we can counter Kane's death ring. I'm assuming we can take your moon disk with us--is there any other way your sorceries can aid us?"

"We'll try to arrange for the simulacrum to accompany you, though I doubt its magic could withstand the fury of Bloodstone's limitless energy for very long." Gerwein's chin lifted resolutely; her eyes flashed determination, if not hope.

"There is one desperate spell which remains to us that may be effective--a spell that will force Bloodstone to the defensive. But this is magic of terrible potency. I had hoped not to resort to such evocation, since the forces that will be unshackled will be almost beyond the limits of sorcery to control. There is no longer a choice to make, it seems.

"As you know, Shenan, goddess of the moon, is mistress of the ocean tides. Kranor-Rill was sea before it rotted into morass, and thus its boundaries once were part of the tidal realm. There is a spell, a most dangerous spell, that will loose the ancient tides upon the lands where once they held dominion. I intend to send the waters of the Western Sea into Kranor-Rill... to hurl the power of the tides against Arellarti!"

"Can the sea destroy Bloodstone?" demanded Dribeck with desperate interest.

"Who can say?" returned Gerwein. "The tides are as powerful a force as our race knows. Perhaps the sea can conquer Bloodstone--or at least so devastate its walls of living stone that the power lattice will be shattered and we can win a delay from our doom. If nothing more, Bloodstone must concentrate its power to counter our threat, and in that interval you may have some chance to strike a blow for its glowing heart."

"Better than I dared hope for," Dribeck observed bleakly. "Cast your spells with the greatest art you command, Gerwein! I'll hold my attack until we learn what fate wills."

"What the goddess wills," Gerwein corrected, with a flash of her old assurance. Rising to leave, she reached for the book.

"May I examine this?" Dribeck asked. "I'm not altogether unlearned in the Old Tongue."

The priestess shrugged. "As you wish, milord. But I warn you, those pages hold only despair, and there's enough of that in the air we breathe."

When Mad Dreams Die

Teres continued to sit in brooding silence for a long while after Gerwein's departure. Dribeck spared little time to wonder at her unwonted mood. His limping cousin he sent to oversee preparations for the final battle. His army was hideously mauled, such of it as remained, and it would be a worn and battered band who fought for mankind's last hope. Thinking to glean some undiscovered thread of knowledge--a buried secret that would command the tide of victory--the Selonari lord bent his attention to the moldering manuscript. With difficulty he translated the antique script.

So engrossed was he that he paid scant mind to Teres's sudden and pointless question: "Do you think Kane can read Old Tongue?"

Dribeck looked up in bewilderment. "If any man within a thousand miles of here could, Kane is probably that one," he replied abstractly. "I begin to believe Old Tongue may be his native language!"

Teres did not enlarge, and Dribeck was immediately back to his task. He failed to notice when she rose with set jaw and strode from the tent.

But he was aware of her when she returned, for he had shoved the tome aside in irreverent frustration to stare gloomily at the blue skies and green forestland without. She had saddled Gwellines and led the restless gray stallion into his field of vision. His eyes grew strange as he recognized her undaunted figure, now proud beneath a shirt of light mail.

The doorway framed her as she entered, the fire of her braid softening to gold when it passed from sunlight to shadow. Her blue eyes looked straight into his, their reckless light steady with decision. "I'm taking that book to Kane," she stated.

Dribeck's face showed no comprehension.

"I've thought it all through," she explained simply. "Kane is the keystone to the power of Bloodstone. If Kane dies, the crystal is dormant once more. And Kane has the power to destroy Bloodstone, if he wills. At least he told me he could.

"Kane doesn't realize the doom that lies in the crystal's evil soul, though he knows Bloodstone withholds secrets from him. Bloodstone has betrayed him. Kane would never have revived this alien horror had he known its true nature; he believes the crystal is no more than an invincible weapon that he can wield as he pleases. So did we all think until today.

"I intend to reveal to Kane the nightmarish truth which underlies his mad dream. This ancient book will bear proof, if he doubts my word. Bloodstone's servant turned on his crystal master once before, and brought ruin to its dark scheme. I figure Kane will not be pleased to learn he's been this creature's fool.

"If he won't--or can't--destroy the crystal perhaps I can get a knife between his ribs," she finished grimly.

Dribeck frowned, logic and emotion both howling at once in his tumbling thoughts. "In the first place, you'd be killed before you reached Arellarti. In the second place, Kane himself will kill you on sight. You may recall that your interference foundered a meticulously crafted plot, that Kane had only murder in his heart for you at your sudden parting."

"I'll chance both," Teres replied levelly. "What few Rillyti he has left are probably pulled back to defend the walls; the other dangers of the swamp I'll have to risk. Kane will know I'm coming as soon as I tread the causeway, and if I'm alone, I think he'll grant me safe passage--out of curiosity, if for no other reason. And perhaps he'll see me for other reasons, as well. I think his actions when I escaped arose from his sudden murderous rage. We... meant much to one another... for a breath of time. He remembers."

"And does Kane still mean something to you?" grated Dribeck, surprised to know jealousy.

"I don't know," Teres mumbled. "For all the evil he's done, I still don't know. You yourself seem to admire him still... I don't know."

He realized distantly that this was true. "Gerwevn has evoked the ancient tides. The Western Sea will rush upon Kranor-Rill and engulf Arellarti. You'd die with the rest."

"Gerwein's sorcery won't prevail over Bloodstone," she snorted. "I know its power because I've seen Arellarti. The witch's spells are false hope and wasted time. Even were they not in vain, I'd still chance it. Kane is the fulcrum of victory, and I'm the only one who can reach him."

I can't let emotion twist my thoughts at this point, reflected Dribeck, but he said, "I can't let you take the risk."

"Look, damn it!" Teres snarled in flashing anger. "I'm not asking you to let me do anything! I'm telling you what my intentions are, and then I'm acting on it! Kindly remember that I'm not one of your captains or gentry! My city may be in ruins, my army may be but a handful, but I now rule Breimen, and my status concerning you is that of an ally on equal terms! Well, as such I've notified you of my battle plans, as courtesy dictates, and I don't need your leave to follow my own strategy!"

"All right, I'll concede your right to direct your actions as you judge best," grumbled Dribeck. "It's rather that--"

"That I'm a woman and you're a man--and a man protects and gives orders, and a woman obeys and gives thanks for her champion's protection! Well, you know where you can shove that idea! I'm taking that book to Kane, and if I die, then I'll die my own master! I'll trust to my own good sword arm for protection--and be better served!"

Which stung perhaps worst of all. "Climb off my back, Teres, damn it! I'm not going to stop you! I won't even deny that your plan is as sound a strategy as any that's left to us. I just wanted to be certain you know the odds you're taking on. Start when you're ready, and good luck to you!"

Still angry, Teres snatched up the palimpsest and stalked from the pavilion. She secured it within her saddlebag, then swung onto the stallion, still not meeting Dribeck's eye.

"Good luck, Teres!" he called, this time meaning it. But he could not tell whether she heard him. Gwellines snorted and shied as his hooves crossed the torn, muddy earth which surrounded the causeway's terminus. Uneasy, Teres noticed that the crimson aura of the igneous stones was a visible

haze even by day light. She spoke soothingly to the stallion, stroked his pulsing neck, and when she touched spur to his flank Gwellines struck hooves upon the unnatural pavement. As he cantered forward into the rotting land, tiny sparks danced eerily where iron scored the glassy surface.

Like a streak of molten light, the roadway bore into the depths of Kranor-Rill. For miles it stretched, an unwavering line that lifted above the fetid mire and labyrinthine hillocks of vegetation. Even now Teres found spirit to marvel at this masterwork of _supernormal engineering. Her sword lay ready for whatever danger might challenge her intrusion, but no springing threat was visible. There was a strange quietness overhanging the swamp. Within the tangles of leprous undergrowth nothing stirred. Not even a serpent basked upon the causeway, and the expected swarms of malicious insects had vanished. It was as if the venomous denizens of Kranor-Rill had withdrawn into the deeper reaches of the swamp, had retreated from the alien evil that radiated from the lustrous stones.

As she rode, her anger cooled and her thoughts returned to Lord Dribeck. Teres regretted that their final words had been scathing; the Selonari lord had become as close a friend as there remained to her, and it pained her that this bitter memory would be their last one.

No! She would not resign herself to death.

The swamp lay all about her, writhing, mist-cloaked desolation. The stark severity of the roadway soon grew to monotony, and with the stagnant fog swallowing the horizons, she quickly lost all conception of time and distance. She seemed to ride endlessly through a glowing tunnel in the blood-tinged mist, while half-seen and sinister shapes loomed and crouched beyond the uncanny silence that encircled her. Haunting her was the knowledge of insurmountable danger that tightened like a hangman's noose with every crash of Gwellines's hooves, lurked half-formed in her imagination, gnawing with acid-venomed fangs on the strained fibers of her nerves. An unbearable sensation of menace hung like a deepening chill upon the charged atmosphere.

And even before its familiar walls jutted through the dank vapor, Teres could see the nimbus light of serpentine evil that reached out from Arellarti.

The monolithic bronze portal stood open, dwarfing the giant figure who slouched, arms folded, against an obelisk. His arrogant smile greeted her, but it seemed to her the insolent strength of his massive frame had weathered gaunt, haggard, eroded by some nameless and vampirish force.

"So you've come back, she-wolf," spoke Kane in a tired voice.

For a space she had no words, forgot the hazily rehearsed phrases she had considered during her ride. Kane had been aware of her coming since she first spurred her mount onto the causeway. With mixed emotions he had allowed her to approach. The rage he had known at Teres's betrayal had been fleeting, a wound he suppressed by the memory of her companionship. For in Kane's world, hate was as constant a force as the numberless sands that drifted across a desert. After so long an existence within its shifting dunes, he little felt the stinging, and winds which remolded the changeless waste. Love was rare, elusive. Seldom did Kane chance upon love in his blighted wandering; fewer still were the times his hand had closed upon its subtle mystery.

He wanted Teres; that was enough. But while he might dismiss his own anger toward her, Kane understood that the same might not be so for the girl. Teres had repudiated him once before, and since that moment Kane had only given her further cause to hate him. That her return to him now was of uncertain portent Kane bitterly realized. Yet he welcomed Teres, while in his mind Bloodstone's insinuating voice urged him to destroy her.

"I had wondered if you might return," Kane went on. "Have you then reconsidered my offer to you? Two armies that would have opposed me have been destroyed, and the desperate sorceries of Shenan's daughters will not shield Lord Dribeck after tonight. Or do you come on his behalf? Dribeck always impressed me as a man of intelligence. If he recognizes the hopelessness of his position, I'll be willing to come to terms with Selonari. As you can see, few of my toads returned from last night's skirmish. But then, it's been my plan all along to replace my ugly servitors with a human army. It would be advantageous for us all if Dribeck decides to throw his lot in with me. I've no wish to devastate my future properties any further."

Teres slid from her saddle while Kane talked. There was a glint of irony to his eyes that made her wonder. Only a few of his Rillyti warriors were in sight, so that she pondered a sudden thrust with her blade. Kane seemed to know her thoughts, by the sardonic mockery of his aspect; he remembered that she had balked at killing him once before when he lay helpless, and he dared her now to strike. Teres was not certain she could... despite the doom that impended. She must try first to reason with Kane; if that failed... then, if steel could slay him, her hand must make the attempt.

"Dribeck still means to fight you, Kane," she announced confidently. "If you believe last night's battle destroyed either our military strength or our resolve to crush this alien horror you serve, then you'll soon learn your error. Nor do I return to be consort to your iniquity. I've come to warn you, Kane--warn you of the evil your ill-conceived ambition has set free."

"A dialogue we've had often enough," he pointed out sarcastically.

"In the past you argued with a half-knowledge that was a trap deadlier than pure lies! Your egotistic confidence blinded you to the truth of your situation. What do you really know of Bloodstone, other than the fragmented guesses of a madman's writings and the veiled lies Bloodstone whispers to you?"

Her hands shook as she withdrew the palimpsest, for her fingers held the most potent weapon left, for mankind's defense. "You won't believe me, I know. But maybe you'll recognize the truth from this book!" She offered it to him. His expression was one of dubious curiosity.

"Kane, the Krelran weren't masters of the crystal! They were Bloodstone's slaves!"

Kill her! Destroy her and her book of lies!

Kane winced as the command thundered through his skull. The ring on his fist tingled, burned, throbbed with the lethal intensity of a coiled serpent. And perhaps because of the desperate rage that screamed at him, he hesitated no longer. From her hand he tore the ancient volume. He glanced at it cursorily, then concentrated over the nearly effaced script.

Night was stealing over the forest. Dribeck returned from the Temple's encampment, his face lined and ashen from what he had seen there. The weirdly illumined knoll was a phantasmagoria of writhing figures and wailing incantation. Fear crouched ominously upon its slopes, and the rising power of Gerwein's spell swirled through the dying twilight like black lightning. The cries of those who lay stretched upon Shenan's altar were like the mournful call of a lost night bird, chilling in despair, more a dirge than a moan of fear.

Dribeck shuddered, not liking to think of that spreading mound of pale, cold forms. "However this turns out," he remarked to Crempra, "Gerwein will not profit from her magic. Did you see the faces of the men? Only their fear of Bloodstone keeps them from putting the entire pack of those witches to the sword! If we live to return, Selonari will shun the Temple for many a year. All this foul sorcery, whether Bloodstone's or Shenan's, has sickened the land. Gerwein will find no grateful hearts after this night--only bellies cold with loathing!"

"Darkness doesn't come tonight," Crempra observed. "The light of Shenan's hell-moon shines over our camp, and Kranor-Rill is ablaze with misty flames of emerald and scarlet. See how the light pulses ever brighter!"

"Bloodstone's power must be close to its peak even now," said Dribeck without hope. "Gerwein fears for the success of her magic. Already her spells should have lured the Western Sea into our land, but Bloodstone combats her witch-tide. Now her evocation becomes more intense, more potent than she might dare. The power of Bloodstone interferes without faltering, holds the tides in their natural ebb and flow. Unless her magic can exhaust Bloodstone, overcome its unyielding resistance, we will have to attack Arellarti with no power more miraculous than the might of our sword arms. Shenan knows how we can succeed after the fearsome power of her magic has failed to conquer Bloodstone!"

He gazed at the roadway with troubled eyes. "Still nothing from Teres?"

Asbraln shook his head.

Dribeck sighed bitterly. "She was our best hope, though I sicken to think of her danger." For the hundredth time in the last hour he silently berated himself for his angry words at their parting. The girl had gotten to him, he could no longer deny that even to himself. Her defiant independence drew him to her as a man admires the fierce self-reliance of a wild and untamable creature. She knew the odds against her, but on her own initiative she undertook this perilous quest. And he was witless enough to insult her courage, try to shelter her like some shivering court wench who would whimper and cling to her protector at the first hint of danger.

"It must be a good twenty-mile ride to Arellarti," he mused aloud. "She should have returned by now." A hundred unpleasant fantasies whispered in his mind. Even if she were still alive, unless she could escape Arellarti, she would die in the destruction of the city--should Gerwein's spell be victorious in this unseen conflict of science and sorcery. Still, she had known the risks of her mission.

"I'm going after Teres," someone announced in Dribeck's voice.

Crempra was gaping at him.

"I have to know what's happened to her," he explained lamely. "Need to reconnoiter the city's defenses, anyway. Gerwein's magic isn't going to work:"

"Hell, cousin!" Crempra blurted. "Send out a scout, then! No point in you throwing your life away. Someone has to lead us."

"Doesn't look like my life is destined to be long and peaceful, anyway you cut it," Dribeck retorted, his mind set. "I'll chance it like this."

"One man couldn't get through. Maybe a small force of cavalry," suggested Crempra.

Dribeck threw him a sharp glance. "Maybe so. I'll put about fifty men on our best mounts. Try to get in and back before... well, before whatever horror this night will bring, breaks loose."

Crempra shrugged fatalistically. "Guess even with this ankle I can still ride as well as anyone. Just might get a chance to use my bow once or twice, before we're wiped out to a man."

Dribeck looked with surprise upon his cousin. "You're the one who boasts of discretion in battle. You should stay to command, if I don't return."

"What is there worth leading? And who'd follow me? No, cousin, I don't suffer from your compelling desire to rule. Someone else can endure that responsibility--I'll enjoy the pleasures he's too harassed to sample. If you're determined to lead a suicide raid on Arellarti, I'll ride along. Before we all die, I'd at least like a glimpse of our enemy's fortress. Do you realize Teres is the only one of us who's actually seen Bloodstone?"

From his cot, Asbraln was making anxious sounds about joining them. But his thigh wound would burst open if he tried to mount, and Dribeck firmly argued him down, reflecting all the while on the resolution that underlay his cousin's customary flippancy.

"I'll get the men mounted, and we'll ride immediately," said Dribeck, wondering if he could get volunteers. Since their position was untenable, anyway, perhaps he could find enough men willing to join commando raid. "We'll ride hard," he continued. "Get in, find out what's there, and get back. If Gerwein fails; we'll bring up the infantry and siege machinery. No time for that now, and I don't want to risk it against the chance of sudden flood. Maybe we'll make it back. If not... Asbraln, use your judgment. Ivocei is a capable captain and comes of a good house--he's as close to a ranking officer as you'll have left." Absently he realized that very likely the future leadership of Selonari would no longer be of concern to himself, or to anyone for that matter.

"For long there have been some who have questioned it," proudly remarked Asbraln, as his lord dashed off into the evening shadow, "but there's man's blood in his heart, beyond doubt!"

Crempra struggled to force bandaged foot into boot. "Damned stupid way of judging that!" he grimaced. "Just because he jumps out of character and throws his life away on a thoughtless gamble. If that's your idea of heroism, you've never really thought about it."

Asbraln snorted. "No heroism in forever following the calculations of one's cunning mind. A man ought to attempt the illogical, if there's fire in his heart. So why are you going with him?"

Crempra laughed mirthlessly and did not answer.

Kane's face was strangely lined when at last he closed the book; his hands were calm, but it was a feat of will to hold them from tearing out in blind anger. Only his blue eyes flamed with ice-fires of inexpressible rage.

There was no doubt. The hints and forbodings which Bloodstone's ceaseless whisper had suppressed now burst to the surface of his tumultuous thoughts. Even while he forced himself to read, to understand, Bloodstone's desperate commands had shrieked through his brain, urging him to read no further, to

destroy the book, confusing his thoughts as he groped to awareness. Countless rational arguments told him to ignore what he read--poisoned thoughts masquerading as his own. Were Kane not convinced of the manuscript's authenticity, its accuracy, the frantic efforts of the alien crystal to block his recognition of his true status were damning.

"Alorri-Zokros was not omniscient," muttered Kane in an unreal voice. "Or my transcription had certain fatal inaccuracies."

"Now you know the truth," breathed Teres, wondering what this victory might avail. "You aren't Master of Bloodstone--you're its slave! It's lied to you from the moment you so rashly brought it back to life--maybe before, even--duped you into serving its will, while it lay yet powerless. While it secretly conspired to enslave all mankind to sustain the hideous appetites of its evil race! You thought you would be ruler of a world empire, Kane, but your role will only be chief foreman of the numberless slaves. You resurrected a monstrous evil that the entire might of the elder gods sought in vain to destroy! You've made yourself the most wretched traitor mankind will ever know!"

Kane made a grinding sound deep in his throat, and Teres cringed at the unreasoning fury that blazed from his brow. He rushed past her, his visage the mask of a madman who knows the curse of his madness. Awed by the forces she had unchained, Teres dashed after him, oblivious to the few batrachians who watched in fear.

"Bloodstone!" Kane roared, bursting into the central dome. "Bloodstone!" His wrath was not to be contained by cold telepathic converse.

I warned you to destroy her. Do you find pleasure in your awakening?

"Someone's going to be destroyed before the day grows darker!" snarled Kane, stalking toward the control dais.

Stop this senseless rebellion, Kane! What if your insignificant vanity has been crushed? You are useful to me as you are. Continue to serve me of your free will, and my power will yet bring to you all the wealth and luxury you lust for.

"I'll be slave to neither god nor devil--nor to a freak of alien science! You played me for a fool, Bloodstone! For that I'll kill you, even though your lies promised me power greater than the gods!"

Stop this, Kane! You can't harm me now! Control your petty anger before you force me to take action!

"Your slave turned against you once before! I can destroy you with these hands that returned you to life!"

Then I was too weak to halt his treacherous attack! Now no hand can turn against me!

"I know the restrictions of your power! I form an all-essential link in your perverted life-force! You can't destroy me without destroying yourself, but I don't need you to live!" He reached the crescent.

Fool! Do you think I can't command obedience from a pitiful slave like you!

"Too late for your lies now!" Kane's hand touched a crystal knob.

Pain! Unendurable pain burst through every shrieking nerve in his contorted frame. Kane heard himself

screaming--a wordless cry of agony that came unbidden to his tortured throat. For an endless stretch of time the pain racked his helpless body, stabbing white-hot fangs into every atom of his being.

It ended sometime, somehow, he realized dimly, feeling the warm stones pressing against his crumpled form. An echo caromed through the burning dome, and he supposed it was the sound of his scream. The agony had vanished, left his shaken body sick with the memory. Teres was running toward him. Drunkenly he called for her to stay back. She ignored him.

While I may not do you physical harm, as you now know, I can give you much pain--unbearable pain that will not relent, even when your cringing mind is no more than a soulless lump of pulsing jelly! You wear a slave's shackle on your hand, Kane, and you are my creature. Continue this futile rebellion, and I'll blast your soul with such agony that your mind will shrivel and crumble. You'll serve me better if you yield to my power, but even a mindless tool can be used by a master's hand--until a better tool is provided. When my brothers come, you'll find that you're not irreplaceable. Think on this while you ponder fruitless rebellion.

Now kill that girl before she causes me further inconvenience!

"Get out of here, Teres!" Kane gritted, his spirit one of unquenchable hate. "Bloodstone will kill you!"

She knelt beside him, tried to drag him to his feet, but his knees would not yet brace. Although she knew nothing of Bloodstone's thoughts, she had sensed the conflict from Kane's words, understood that some unendurable shock had felled him as he seized the control rods. "I won't leave you here!" she swore, not questioning the resolution she felt.

"Run, damn it! You're the one who's endangered!" He got his feet under him and slid upward against the dais.

Shall I force you to obey? Never mind--my other slaves will follow my bidding. The sorcerous attack of my enemies grows more persistent now. A vain attempt, but it angers me to waste power in staving off their frantic efforts. Once I have reached my brothers, and can spare attention to their annoyance, I mean to annihilate this source of resistance.

Think well on what you have learned, slave. If you forget this stupid tantrum, and serve me well... you'll find that I am a benevolent master. Resist, and you'll still serve me--but without pleasure for either of us. Once you might have broken your bonds, my fool, but now there is no power in your world that can conquer me!

The jeering thoughts withdrew.

"Kane!" gasped Teres. "The Rillyti!" Entering the shimmering dome were ten or more batrachians. The bared blades in their webbed fists left no doubt as to their intent. Inwardly Teres despaired, for against these monstrous assailants her sword arm would win her only moments more of life.

A cutting rasp, and Kane stood with blade in his hand. "Run between those two columns of instruments!" he growled, pointing. "That'll guard our flanks and rear, and the toads will have to meet us head-on!"

They raced to the glowing instrument banks, just as the Rillyti lumbered down upon them. Kane thrust Teres behind him, caught the blade of the first attacker and tore it from its grasp with the unbridled rage that drove his arm. The creature's head split like cordwood, and Teres's sword stabbed out to disembowel another. "Stay back!" Kane yelled. "They don't dare kill me! It's you they want!"

Teres cursed him. "I'll kill my own snakes! They're wild enough to cut you in half with a misaimed blow!"

That might solve some problems, she reflected suddenly. Right now--a quick thrust through Kane's back! She knew she could not do it. Not while he fought against her murderers--no matter how much depended on his death. Uneasily she recalled the unforeseen consequences of her attempt to cut off the bloodstone ring, and she wondered if Kane could be slain by common steel.

The Rillyti, pressing their attack, tried to bear Kane down under their weight. They must not kill the man, but the girl must die, and since she was protected by the other, their onslaught was poorly executed. Several of their number now flopped across the slippery floor, testament to the deadliness of the human blades; others drew back to minister to flowing wounds. About the combatants, Bloodstone's fame pulsed ever brighter as the demon of alien science battled the forces of sorcery marshaled to defeat it.

The attack abruptly ceased. Teres almost fell past Kane as she lunged for a retreating assailant. Leaving their dead, the swamp creatures shambled from the dome.

Your pet may live, until I have time to deal with her as she deserves. A few of her comrades ride toward my gate, but they shall not ride back. You may return to my favor by destroying these rash intruders... No? Remain and sulk, then. My other slaves will deal with them.

Their sorcery is nearing the limits of their powers to command it, but the seas obey my will instead. I have no time for these petty distractions now. The moment draws close when the stars will assume the optimum configuration--then shall my brothers join with me and I with them! These vexing sorceries shall vanish like blown dust when the moment comes!

"Kane! What's happening!" demanded Teres, as the batrachians withdrew from their attack.

Kane explained. "Dribeck sends a mounted force against Arellarti. It must be a small band, since Bloodstone only sends the remains of its Rillyti army to ambush them. The crystal is too concerned with other matters to waste attention on such a trifling threat."

"Can you use that ring? Destroy the Rillyti--or turn it against Bloodstone?"

Kane shook his head. "Impossible. Since Bloodstone powers the ring, I can't direct it against any target the crystal refuses."

"Can't you do anything to stop it?"

"I'll try something--wait for a chance!" he promised. The fury in his eyes bore witness to his intention. The coruscating brilliance waxed more intense than ever, seared the eyes. Even the sullen stones of the walls were pulsing with molten light.

"The stars are right," groaned Kane. "It's reaching out for its brothers, seeking through the wilderness beyond the stars for its race! Can you sense the flow of incalculable energies through the gem? Bloodstone is reaching out through both time and space as it searches! Now its power warps the laws of the physical universe!"

"No longer does it trouble to cloak the secret recesses of its mind. I can see them now, know the hidden thoughts of this creature's iniquitous soul. There! The cyclopean laboratory where Bloodstone and its brothers take form--are born! The weapons of a blighted alien science turn against their creators! The

unthinkable destruction of their wars! There are thoughts here I cannot grasp... I dare not... !"

The intolerable radiance made ghastly the twisted mask of his face. "Quickly, Teres!" he warned. "There's too much danger in this place!" Without waiting for acquiescence, Kane clutched her shoulder and propelled her from the dome as if she were a frail child.

Something more than anger haunted his face, once they were outside. What horror has he looked upon? wondered Teres fearfully. Around them the entire city was pulsing with unnatural luminance.

"Can you die by your own hand?" she asked unsteadily.

Kane laughed, a cruel bark reminiscent of his accustomed spirit. "Probably Bloodstone would try to stay my hand. I wonder how many of my actions of late were of my own volition. I don't really know... How closely it guards its slave! But I'll not die before the crystal dies--dies with the knowledge of its defeat!"

"With you dead, then Bloodstone would be powerless," Teres said pointedly.

"For the moment, perhaps. But I don't plan to sacrifice my life, if I can help it!" He held her with his eyes. "Or do you think to slay me?"

She shivered. "I don't know that I can--even to save mankind! But if I knew that you would reconsider, willingly serve Bloodstone in return for the scraps it tosses to you..."

"I'll serve no master but myself!" spat Kane. "Mankind has given me little cause to feel loyalty toward the race, but no creature will use Kane as its pawn and live to reap the spoils of its game!"

They had neared the gate. Now the rising nimbus of light made the night as midday. Kane abruptly froze, his mind distant, listening...

...to a silent scream of terror!

Bloodstone had reached out beyond the stars. Pulsing with the flow of cosmic energy, it called to its brothers. Called to those who had shared its unnatural birth in distant millennia. To those who formed the complete network of its being. Those who had battled alongside it in the desperate wars of long ago. Who would be waiting through the centuries to share a unified existence once more. Waiting for the fulfillment of the perfect lattice...

Bloodstone searched... and found nothing! Bloodstone called out... and received no answer. Frantically, while the giant crystal grid of Arellarti pulsed and flamed, Bloodstone sought through the corridors of interdimensional space. There was nothing.

Bloodstone was alone.

Knowledge came that its brothers lay with the dust of an eons-forgotten war.

And that knowledge brought... madness!

Its alien mind was structured on the logic of symmetry, the fulfillment of geometric perfection. In the shattering realization that it stood alone, incomplete, imperfect, the inconceivable rationale of the crystal entity fell into chaos. Power suddenly surged without control through its lattice depths as Bloodstone's insane mind flung raving energies across the universe.

Even Teres sensed its demented shriek, and Kane reeled as if he had been bludgeoned. Bleats of terror echoed from the swamp beyond, and she glimpsed crashing bufanoid shapes as they burst through the morass in panic. The effulgence of the walls pulsed into a blinding torrent of mottled crimson, and all the earth seemed ablaze with scintillant flame.

"It's gone mad!" yelled Kane, clutching his head in pain. "The others of its race are dead, and Bloodstone's soul has gone amok! It lashes out in the mindless rage of a beheaded serpent--deadly still, but blind to the attack of its enemy!"

Gwellines reared against his tether, trumpeted in fear at the screaming brilliance. With savage strength Kane halted his plunging, so that the stallion knew Teres's hand, and calmed somewhat. In an instant Kane swept the startled girl through the air and slapped her onto saddle. The gate was yet open.

"Ride fast, Teres!" he commanded. "There is only death now in Arellarti! Ride to the forest and beyond! You and the others can escape! Bloodstone and I have not finished this game!"

"I'll not go and leave you to die! Gwellines, can carry us both!"

"There'll be no time! Bloodstone is berserk, and sorcery ravens down over Arellarti! This chaos will be my only chance to destroy the demon I've set free! I'll try to escape through the interdimensional projection--there'll be no time for anything else!"

He caught her arm. "If there is a tomorrow for us, will you come with me, Teres?"

She looked into his baleful eyes, and the words she wanted to say hung in her throat. "Kane, once we could have shared a life together. Even now I can't deny the attraction I feel toward you. But there is too much between us now--too great an abyss for love to bridge!"

Kane's lips drew back. His eyes searched her face and knew the pain there. "Words I've heard too often! Ride on, she-wolf! Tie your fate to Dribeck, if you will--or whatever whim your spirit thinks it desires. You'll not forget Kane, I think. Now ride, before doom overtakes you! For either Bloodstone or Kane must die this night!"

His hand struck Gwellines, and the stallion plunged for the open gate. Along the molten causeway he tore, bearing off his desperately clinging rider at a reckless gallop. Alien horror shambled forth from Arellarti now, and the warhorse sensed the urgency of flight.

Teres could barely rein in her mount as she burst upon Dribeck and his band, still bewildered that the Rillyti ambush which had closed upon them had broken into terrified rout, midway in the creatures' attack.

Dribeck brightened with unexpected relief to see Teres racing toward them through the blood-red stream of light. "We put the toads to flight!" he shouted, as the horse reared in a shower of sparks.

"Go back!" warned Teres, before he could speak further. "We can do nothing in Arellarti. Kane has turned upon Bloodstone, and devils wage war in the night!"

Now all his dreams had been plunged into nightmare, and the lure of adventure had become a spider web of horror. The power that had promised him mastery of the stars was a lie to chain him into soulless slavery. Madness reigned at the death of a mad dream, and the cold strength of his fury was all that reaved the shackles of insanity.

Kane entered the dome and strode heavily toward the dais. The berserk crystal knew him, sensed his intent. A crackling ball of emerald flame flared about him--the suicidal rage of a scorpion, which stings itself when entrapped by an enemy it cannot face. Kane stalked forward, heedless of the stabbing coils.

Bloodstone still fought against the forces of Shenan's magic--holding sorcery at bay despite the cosmic madness that howled through its alien mind. Dimly it was aware of Kane and marshaled its tortured energies to defend itself. But its broken power was no longer irresistible.

Kane felt its phantom voice gibber in his mind. A thousand reasons sought to turn his steps aside. A thousand promises tempted his soul. Hideous threats struck out at him, in berserk chaos coupled with the gilded pleas.

He ignored them all.

Then came the invisible pain, but no more was it of unendurable intensity. Kane staggered, bit his lips to bloody froth, unfelt against the greater agony. He did not scream. The dark force of his hatred, his rage threw a shield about his mind, burned back the gobbling tentacles of pain which sought to crush his spirit.

His lips moved, spitting curses in a score of languages, roaring defiance at the stricken monster whose demented throes strangled him, ripped at him with searing agony. Through waves of torment, like a desperate swimmer who would not drown, Kane forced his buckling legs to hold him upright, to take inching steps forward.

Streamers of energy wreathed him as he fell across the stone crescent and clutched at the projections for support. Now the pain was not psychic alone, for Bloodstone's flailing claws tore blackened welts across his skin. In its berserk dementia, the crystal struck at its own flesh. Its frantic howls threw Kane's mind into confusion, disrupted his thought as he strove to recall the task he must perform.

Kane braced himself against the relentless onslaught. His was a mind centuries wise in the psychic mysteries, his spirit indomitable from centuries of constant struggle to survive. No man could resist the might of Bloodstone, even crippled as was the crystal entity now. The wrath of Kane was more than human. He found the strength through hate.

His fist smashed down against a protruding rod. Bloodstone screamed in pain--and in sudden fear.

Not pausing, Kane struck out with bleeding knuckles, thrust an entire row of metal rods deep into the stone crescent. His other hand pawed against the crystal projections and slashed fingers on the slowly turning ceramic knobs.

Intolerable lancination shuddered through him, and he clung to the projections of the dais to keep from slumping to the floor. The bloodstone ring burned into his flesh, as if his entire hand had been plunged into molten iron. Grimly he fought back unconsciousness, knowing its relief would only mean death. With pain-fogged movements he reset the rods and projections of the blazing crescent. He forced himself to lock in the controls, to overload the monolithic circuitry.

Now the brilliance of Bloodstone was a hungry glare that seared his blurring vision. Agony throbbed through him in cadence with the burning waves of pulsing incandescence. The heat was not an illusion. Beneath his touch the stones were blistering his flesh. The entire power web of Arellarti was blazing with uncontrolled energy, rising like the molten cone of a volcano from the steaming swampland.

Kane had jammed the external controls, which governed the colossal energies that Bloodstone sucked from the cosmos. The nightmarish creation of elder science was trapped in the full torrent of the power it fed upon. Like an unbraked millwheel caught in an inconceivable flood, Bloodstone was snared in a vortex of energy that raced out of control, pent up with no outlet, raging power that would tear it to atoms.

The stones trembled beneath his smoking boots. Kane could hear a distant roar, a rumble beneath the whining howl of Arellarti, as if some unimaginable storm were bursting through the darkness beyond the blazing city.

Fool! Your betrayal will destroy us together!

That was the last coherent thought Kane was to sense from Bloodstone. Desperately he worked over the dials and protrusions which controlled the powers of interdimensional projection. Regardless of its amok insanity, Bloodstone would have to respond to the settings of its instruments--for all its malevolent soul, it had been designed as a machine by its creators. Or would it respond? Could it, even, with the damage Kane had inflicted?

The crushing roar of doom rushed closer, and Kane knew this slim chance was all that remained. Would there even be time for a vengeful Bloodstone to transport him to a nearby locus? Though he might die in the crystal's disintegrating embrace--or wander disembodied through the, interdimensional gulfs--Kane made the gamble.

Once more the coils of coruscant energy wrapped about him. Kane was borne through the crystal gateway to the abyss beyond natural space and time...

Abruptly released from the immovable barrier that had so thoroughly repelled its sorcerous tides, the waters of the Western Sea plunged inland--as if through a sundered dam of vast height.

On their knoll the daughters of Shenan wailed in sudden fear, for the force of their most dangerous spells had broken loose at the collapse of Bloodstone's resisting power. Bursting past the vanished obstruction, their sorcerous might recoiled with pent-up potency far beyond their calculations.

Not a phantom tide, to steal upon the stronghold of their enemy, obeyed their compelling summons. A tidal wave more than a hundred yards high smashed through the great fault at Serpent's Tail and drove across the rotting land like the fist of the avenging gods!

Those in the forest fled in terror for the higher ground, fled to escape the witch-tide that ravaged through its ancient shores.

With irresistible might, the mountain of water ripped across the trembling marshlands. Envenomed creatures, stunted trees, choking lianas, bottomless quicksand--all the blighted dwellers of Kranor-Rill were devoured by the ravaging wave.

When it struck the superheated stones of Arellarti, there was a mountainous concussion which seemed to tear the earth apart. In the forest beyond, trees shook, leaned, turned broken roots to the staffs. Those

who ran were thrown to the earth by the enormous shock and threw back frightened gaze to witness the shrieking nova.

Within its almost molten dome, Bloodstone shattered into a billion splinters of glowing energy.

The crested wave broke past this knob of pulverized stone, and the night was once more robed in star-flecked darkness. Like a stinging wash of antiseptic, the sea reached in, then drew back again, leaving behind a scoured land, purged of the evil that had rotted there.

Epilogue

It was spring of another year, and Teres awoke before dawn, knowing a strange restlessness. Old dreams return; ghosts will not lie. Sleep does not come when memories will not fade.

Silently, so not to wake those who slept, she stole from her chamber. Gwellines was restless, too, and nickered a friendly greeting as she saddled him. Past dawnlit gates of Selonari, his hooves trotted south.

Morning came, warmed into noon. The forest was bright with the fresh verdancy of spring. Teres's spirit soared bright and airy as she rode beneath the trees. There was a warm, clean taste to the breeze, so that she reveled in the freshness of the season, like some reawakened woodsprite.

The sun had started its decline when her quest was achieved. With an eerie sense of pilgrimage, she dismounted and approached the contorted stone circle where once she had parted from Kane. Memories came back ever stronger and softened her eyes in recollection. Strange, how moments of happiness were as haunting as the remembrance of terror. An insistent curiosity led her back to the spot where these two emotions had merged.

She walked about with wide and searching eyes. Beneath her foot sounded the soft crunch of last year's leaves, dissolving into the rocky soil. Here he would have come...

Suddenly she stooped, caught up the dully glinting object half buried in the leaf-strewn stone pocket, where a reviling hand had slung it.

"Bright Ommen! I knew it!" Teres cried with a glad laugh.

She rolled the bloodstone ring about on her palm. Its gem was lifeless now, its weight that of an empty shell. The white metal seemed pitted and distorted, the bloodstone opaque and shot through with a

thousand cracks, as if it had been exposed to some unendurable heat, to some intolerable stress.

When she closed her fist upon it, the bloodstone ring crumbled like ancient bone.