

Raven's Eyrie

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Prologue

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

Her fever-bright eyes stared wide with fear as they darted about the room's shadowy corners. But the phantoms of her

nightmare, if nightmare it was, had receded. Klesst brushed the clinging tendrils of red hair from her moist forehead and sat up.

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm thirsty, Mother. My throat feels so hot. Please bring me some water."

How pretty Mother was... Her long black hair brushed down the sides of her face, clasped at her nape, and let fall over her shoulder and down her left breast. Under her shawl, her straight shoulders rose bare from her wide-necked blouse of bleached muslin, full-sleeved and gathered at her wrists. Her narrow waist was cinched by a wide belt of dark leather, crisscrossed with

scarlet cord. Her skirt of brown wool fell in wide pleats to low on her calves, and her small feet were shod in buskins of soft leather. Klesst wore gold circlets pierced through each earlobe—just like Mother—but Greshha had helped her sew bits of embroidery on her garments, while Mother's were unadorned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You have a fever still. Fever brings bad dreams."

"It was that same nightmare."

Mother's eyes were wary. "What nightmare, Klesst?"

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

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

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

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

"Hush! It's only a bad dream!" Her mother's voice was strained.

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

"Stop it!"

The child gasped and looked wonderingly at her mother.

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

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

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

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

I

Ridges of Autumn

"How is he?"

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

Weed spat sourly and nudged his horse alongside the wounded man's mount. The man slumped over his horse's neck was huge, but his thick muscled frame was now nerveless, and only the

ropes which held him to his saddle kept him from toppling to the mountain trail.

Knotting his fingers in the thick red hair, Weed lifted his head. "Kane! Can you hear me?"

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

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

"Kane!"

No response.

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

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

Braddeyas drew his cloak tighter about his narrow shoulders. "Kane won't last till morning unless we rest."

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

The dark-bearded crossbowman shook his head decisively. "Then he'll be counting it beside a roaring fire. You won't find nobody riding these trails tonight. Not with this moon. A man will

risk his life for gold maybe, but not his soul."

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

"The Demonlord's Moon," he whispered.

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

"We can risk a halt, then," Weed surmised.

"We've no choice," commented Darros, his jaw set.

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

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

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

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

"Any other ideas?" demanded Weed. "Night's coming on fast."

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

"What'd he say?" Weed asked.

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

"Any idea what he meant?"

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

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

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

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

"If its walls are standing, the inn will give us shelter until dawn," Frassos pointed out. He coughed thinly, wincing as pain shot through cracked ribs.

"You know the way, Darros, then lead us there," Weed decided. "Daylight's just about gone."

"It is that," someone muttered.

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

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

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

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

They were all dead men.

And night was upon them.

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

"We're almost there," Darros promised him from the darkness ahead.

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

Not quite, Weed observed. Even in the thick gloom, he could see that Raven's Eyrie lay half in ruins. The grey stone and black timber structure crouched on the edge of the deep valley below them, rising from a bluff overlooking the River Cotras. By the dim-eyed rows of windows, Weed noted that the main building of the sprawling caravanserai stood at least three storeys. The outlying wings of the inn appeared no more than fire-gutted walls. River mist hung over the blackened walls of Raven's Eyrie, and in the darkness below the limestone bluff, the Cotras thundered its unseen rush to the western coast.

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

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

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

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

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

"Frassos?" he called again.

No reply. His riderless horse wandered forward instead.

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

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

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

"Should we go back and look for him?"

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

"Does anyone want the job?"

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

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

II

A Guest Returns

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The inhabitants of the inn and its few guests stood frozen against the long bar. There was Mother, her expression unreadable, with Selle, the scrawny serving maid, cowering

against her. Pot-bellied Cholos, who served her mother as tapster, licked his lips nervously and glanced sidelong at the hulking Mauderas, who kept the stables and saw to such heavy work as was ever done at Raven's Eyrie. Mauderas's eyes were sullen as he pressed a hand to his crimson-sodden sleeve. Two guests, apparently drovers, were backed against the bar as well. Another guest, whose green tunic identified him as a ranger, lay crumpled beside an overturned table, a crossbow bolt through his back.

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

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

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

swallow. When he thudded it to the table, the dark green glass was empty to half its depth.

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

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

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

"Good evening, Ionor," he greeted her then.

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

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

Then she heard Kane ask, "Weed, did you check to see if there was anyone else in the upstairs rooms—other than that kid up there by the railing?"

The lanky blond outlaw started to reply, "Just checked the outbuildings so far—going to search the inn right now. They said

there wasn't anybody else here..."

"Be certain," ordered Kane. "And stick that kid in bed."

But Klesst had already fled to her room.

"How are you feeling?" asked Weed, more than a little surprised that Kane had regained consciousness. But then there always seemed to burn some last reserve of strength within his huge body.

Kane grunted noncommittally. "Damn fever comes and goes. Hard to know where I am part of the time. Could swear I wasn't wounded that bad—unless that quarrel was poisoned."

"Ought to have Braddeyas clean that hole in your side, Put on a fresh dressing. Likely it's all festered along your ribs."

"Later, maybe. Don't want to start it bleeding again." Kane rubbed his forehead wearily, wiping away dried blood and greasy trickles of sweat. "Feel stronger once I get some food down, catch some sleep. Can't spare more than a few hours—Pleddis can't be far back."

"Figure we can risk it here till dawn. Darros says Pleddis will have to camp. Demonlord's Moon tonight." Weed paused, then added: "We lost Frassos coming down the ridge."

"No point looking for him," Kane concluded simply. "Not this night."

Seth came stomping down from the rooms overhead. "Nobody else here," he reported. "Just a skinny girl, and I locked her in her room. Second floor's pretty near empty, but there's a big room with a fire going on the third."

Kane nodded. It was hard to concentrate, and he could feel his strength ebbing once more. "Put a guard where he can watch outside, Weed," he ordered. "Another man stay awake to watch

things here. There's a big storeroom past the kitchen there. Tie the men and lock them inside it—no point killing them if they stay in line. Toss that body in with them.

"Leave the women out to clean up this mess. Doubt if anyone else will come along tonight, but if they do, we don't need to give alarm the instant they walk in. Then they can put together some food for us. Watch them closely, though."

His eyes returned to Ionor's drawn face. "But you wouldn't try to poison me, would you, Ionor?"

"It's a cleaner death than I'd wish for you, Kane," came her strained reply.

"Bring me another bottle," Kane told her mockingly. "And one of those hens I smell roasting." Grudgingly she complied. Kane watched the sway of her body as she stiffly came toward him; memory of her drew his lips in a cold smile.

"Sit down," he said. Since it was not an invitation, loner sat down across from him, taking the chair his boot dragged forward.

"Are your memories so bitter, Ionor?"

Her voice was cold, drained of anger—deceptive, for hate edged its timbre. "You and your bandits raided my father's inn, slaughtered our guests, murdered my family, looted and set fire to Raven's Eyrie. You gave my younger sisters to your men to rape until death was a mercy! I could hear their screams even as you had your way with me. I can still hear them. No, Kane! Bitter is too sweet a word for the memories I have of you!"

No emotion touched Kane's pallid face. "Shouldn't have run off on me like you did," he said, dividing the roasted fowl with curious delicacy. "I could have made you forget that night."

His eyes seemed to wander from focus, and Ionor smiled

inwardly to see the fever that racked his giant body. "Nothing will ever erase that night!" she whispered.

A rough hand squeezed her shoulder and drew her from her seat. "Bring food for us," growled Seth, his mouth stuffed with meat he had scooped up from the dead ranger's plate.

"We'll talk more later, perhaps," Kane called after her. Her shoulders tensed, but she made no reply.

"Want some opium?" queried Braddeyas, once they had secured the men in the storeroom. "It'll take the sting out of your side to where you can sleep good. You'll need your strength."

"I can sleep," mumbled Kane, swallowing a mouthful of brandy. "Don't want to dull my wits, with Pleddis likely to catch us before the next ridge." His chin declined slowly toward his chest.

Then he jerked his head erect and stared fiercely about him. "Bring my sword from my saddle!" he demanded. "Pleddis on our necks, and I sit here like a besotted lord at his wedding feast. This is no time to sleep! Fix me a pipe to hold me awake."

Weed signed insistently to Braddeyas, and the broken-toothed outlaw began to fill a pipe with coarse tobacco, secretly stuffing a large crumb of opium into the bottom of the bowl. He lit the pipe with a wood splinter and handed it to Kane.

Darros reappeared at the door, carrying Kane's long sword in one hand, while he hastily drew the bolt with his other. "Thoem! I don't like that mist!" he muttered, not voicing his true thoughts.

Kane took the strangely-hilted blade from him and rested the scabbard against his leg. His fingers touched it, sensed its strength. Steel knew neither pain nor exhaustion, and its only fever was the warmth of an enemy's blood. Kane wished such unfeeling strength were his, for he was desperately tired, and he

dared not rest. His vision blurred and cleared with the throbbing of his skull. "I've gone into battle in worse shape than this," he said defiantly, drawing at the harsh smoke that passed so easily into his lungs.

When the pipe was out, Weed took it from his relaxed fingers. Kane's slumped head did not lift from his chest; his breathing was slow and regular, his eyes closed.

"He'll rest better like this," explained Weed. "Let's get him to a bed. Did you say there was a place ready upstairs?"

Staggering under Kane's weight, Seth and Darros hauled their unconscious leader up the narrow stairway to the inn's topmost floor. There a common room had been prepared for several of the guests; a fire burned on its hearth, and a straw-ticked bed was covered with a quilted blanket. They stretched Kane across the bed and threw the quilt over him.

"Go on and get some rest," advised Weed. "Braddeyas and I will take first watch."

He waited until they had quit the chamber, then bent over Kane's ear. "Kane," he whispered, "Kane, can you hear me?"

Kane made a noise in his throat that might not have signified anything.

Frowning, Weed bent closer. "Where did you hide it, Kane? Remember? You always cached part of your share of the loot. Where did you take it, Kane? You can tell me, Kane. I'm your friend. We'll find your cache and use it to escape. We can live like lords in some other land. Where is it, Kane?"

But the other man seemed too deep in sleep.

Sadly Weed rose from his side. "At least don't die and leave all that gold to rot," he begged.

Opening the lattice window a few inches—for the room was warm, and Weed feared this would increase Kane's fever—he wearily left to join Braddeyas.

III

Ravens Fly by Night

A shower of sparks started up from the fire and disappeared into the black cavern of the chimney. Weed grunted and shoved again with the poker, wedging the new logs closer to their charred predecessors. Perhaps the fire would burn brighter now. The huge fireplace of limestone blocks occupied most of one end of the common room. It should have warmed the entire area; instead its flames crawled dispiritedly over the smouldering logs, and an unseasonal chill for autumn crept through the room.

Wiping his hands, he turned from the hearth to gaze once more through the window. Though the full moon was rising higher above the ridges, thick mist rolled from the Cotras to cloak the valley beyond. There was little to see as Weed squinted through the whorled panes; only the neglected grounds of the inn, the leaf-paved roadway beyond. Above the doorway, the signboard swung with the wind. Its hinges squawled like a raven's croak, and against the inn's lights it flung a swaying shadow across the frosted earth like the shadow of raven's wings.

He examined the bolted door. There should be a man posted

outside, he realized. Even on this night, even though Pleddis was certainly camped a safe distance back on their trail. Again he thought of Frassos's strange disappearance. It was not a night to venture beyond the security of bright lights and locked doors. Even as a stranger to these mountains, Weed sensed the presence of evil abroad beneath Demonlord's Moon.

Gloomily he sank onto a bench, his eyes toward the door. Behind him he could hear sounds from the kitchen. The warm smell of roasting fowl carried from the cooking area beyond the bar. Braddeyas kept watch on the two women. Once food was prepared for the ride before them, the women could be bound and locked in with the others. Then perhaps he could get Braddeyas to stand guard outside the inn.

Weed dug his fingers into his eyes, more savagely than need be, for sleep was numbing his senses. Braddeyas might refuse. Weed wouldn't blame him; he doubted that he would accept the risk, either. And while Weed was second in command now, Braddeyas had been with Kane too many years to be bullied into obedience by the younger outlaw.

The noises from the kitchen seemed farther away, almost melodious. The fire was burning better now, and he could feel its heat on his side. Weed slapped his face stingingly, fighting off the deadly fatigue. Perhaps he should walk about the room.

Maybe he should walk through the door, mount his horse, and ride out. One man would stand a far better chance of escaping pursuit. Let Pleddis overtake Kane and the others. Kane was the reason for his relentless pursuit; he would not bother to press on after one bandit. The price on Weed's head was tempting for a single bounty hunter, but Pleddis had to pay his men; economics would save him. And yet, Kane might well win free. The bandit leader had done the incredible time and again before this. Perhaps Kane could elude the arrows of fate once more,

Weed felt a certain loyalty to Kane. He had fought beside Kane, followed his commands—and Kane had proved to be a highly capable and generous leader. Indeed, in the final battle Weed and the others had broken through Pleddis's ambush on the savage force of Kane's charge through the mercenary ranks. But Weed felt a greater loyalty to his own neck, and it appeared certain that Kane would never again hold power over the Myceum passes. There remained the secret cache of loot that Kane had hidden away—against a disaster such as this. At present Weed's possessions consisted of a sore-hooved mount, a notched sword, and his battle-torn gear. If Kane would lead them to his cache...

The sweet-smoke scent of roasting hens wrapped about him, watering his mouth, though his belly was warm with wine and meat from the meal just eaten. His head fell downward onto his arm. He should get up before sleep claimed him.

And he did rise to his feet. Or he seemed to see his body stand, pace about the room, peer through the fogged bull's-eye panes. The shadows seemed to creep and hover in grotesque patterns as he paced...

With a sudden jarring crash, Weed fell to the floor.

In an instant of confused panic, he thrashed free of the overturned bench and tried to regain his feet, thinking dully that he had rolled off in his sleep. Then he became aware of the jeering face above the swordpoint levelled at his throat. Weed froze.

"Now there we went and woke him up," grinned Pleddis.

Weed swallowed and waited for death. Many hands jerked him to his feet, tore away his sword and dagger. A dozen or more of Pleddis's men were pouting into Raven's Eyrie—entering through the kitchen, where Braddeyas lay with a split skull. A sudden

uproar, fierce but quickly stilled, echoed across the inn as the mercenaries burst in on Darros and Seth. They died where they slept.

Weed sweated. Pleddis's blade glinted before his throat.

The mercenary captain's face was jubilant, but his eyes were like the edge of his sword. "Where's Kane?" he demanded softly.

Scarcely comprehending that disaster had so swiftly overtaken them, Weed stood silent, swaying back from the blade. His mouth was dry.

"You got half a minute to tell me. And you've just about used that up."

Ionor appeared from the kitchen. Her face was flushed and her blouse disordered. "They carried him upstairs," she announced, hatred bright in her voice. "I'll show you where."

"Carried?"

"He's wounded near death, by the look of his side. He couldn't walk."

Pleddis smiled like a wolf at her words. "By Vaul, you were right about your aim, Stundorn! I'll double your share if it sure enough was your quarrel that brought the devil low. Quickly now, show us!"

Leaving Weed under guard, the captain and a number of his men followed Ionor up the stairs to the third level. Triumphantly she led them to the door of the room where Kane had been taken. Pleddis's smile split his leathery face. Inside this room lay the object of his pursuit, the successful conclusion of a dangerous campaign. And a bounty that would leave him a wealthy man.

Knowing Kane's cunning, their weapons were poised for whatever last trick he might have left. In the darkness outside,

others of his men surrounded the inn. Kane would not escape. But even with a crippling wound, they feared the savage power of his sword.

Sucking in his breath, Pleddis kicked open the door. It was unlocked. Slammed back against the wall.

Only silence met them. Kane lay sprawled across the bed, unmoving. A chill wind eddied through the open window. Blood stained the blankets. Kane's arms lay at his sides, in the attitude in which his men had left him. His face was turned to one side; a tiny pool of dampness trickled past his partly opened lips. In the flickering firelight his face seemed unnaturally lax and pale.

Wary of tricks, Pleddis approached the bed. Kane did not move. Only when he reassured himself that no weapon lay near did Pleddis touch the silent figure. Kane's skin was cold as a snake's. Almost impatiently the captain shook his still form, found his body unnaturally rigid. Frowning, he felt for a pulse, then held his blade before the motionless nostrils. No moisture fogged the cold steel.

Pleddis stood up, almost with an air of disappointment

"He's dead."

IV

Hounds and Carrion Crows

Weed slumped against a table, his arms tightly bound behind his back, his mind seeking desperately for some hope of escape. With a sick chill in his belly, he realized his position was without hope. And cutting through the dull panic was the agonizing thought that he had thrown away his life to stay with a dead man.

Pleddis's men filled the common room, warming themselves with fire, food and drink, excited congratulations. He had pulled them all inside when it was evident that the bandits had been taken; they had rushed into the inn as if it were the last refuge against the mist-shrouded night. Maybe it was. There were more than twenty men milling about the room, wearing the motley gear of mercenary soldiers. With their stamping and loud laughter, they sounded like hunters just come in from a grueling and successful hunt. From their impersonal stares, Weed felt like a snared fox surrounded by a pack of baying hounds.

Seated by the fire, Pleddis was in high spirits. He drank wine from a sloshing cup and accepted the applause of his men, his weathered face almost flushed. There was little enough color to the man. His skin was pale and seamed bleached instead of tanned by wind and sun. His hair was close-cropped and grey, his face clean-shaven; his eyes were of a peculiar washed-out blue

so as to appear grey. He was of average height, but compactly built, giving him a deceptively stubby appearance. Gear of worn leather and chain mail ionic were nondescript as his person—and the same faded grey. But his teeth were straight and white, and he flashed them in a broad smile when he laughed, which was often—a rapid, mirthless bark.

He was laughing now.

"A fine last stand for Kane and his fearsome band of killers, eh? Trapped like rabbits in a hole, sleeping like they was in their mother's arms. One man snoring at his post, the other so busy trying to get under the mistress's skirts that he never noticed she'd unlatched the woodshed door to the outside. Vaul, what dreadful desperadoes! I'm going to feel silly asking for the bounty on the likes of you! But I'll still ask!" His men joined in his laughter.

Pleddis gulped down his wine, his shrill laugh muffled against the cup. "Of course, you must have figured Captain Pleddis would lie low tonight, sit shivering at his campfire, jumping every time an owl screamed. Did you now? Sure you did. You really thought I'd quit a trail not hours cold, and after three days of chasing after you! Well, I grew up on Thovnos, so I guess I didn't hear all the gruesome tales of Demonlord's Moon you mountain people like to shudder over. Same goes for most of my men, though some of them had their worries about riding on."

His face turned grim, and he stared contemptuously over their ranks. A number of them avoided his eyes. "But it wasn't too hard to make them see that a pack of devils was a better risk than crossing Pleddis, eh?" He laughed again.

"Huh! What about the two men we lost getting here?" grumbled a mercenary from the rear, who quickly ducked from Pleddis's searching scowl.

"You'll not see them again," a husky voice told them. "The

Demonlord hunts beneath this moon, and you'll see no more of them his hound pulls down."

Pleddis made an annoyed grimace. "Well, he would have found a fat enough morsel in you, old woman."

"Greshha!" There was a strange hint of anger in Ionor's voice.

The older woman crept almost guiltily from behind the mass of soldiers whose entrance she had followed. The servant's plump cheeks were still ashen with fear, and she blinked and trembled as if dazed.

"So she does belong here," said Pleddis. "We found the old woman hanging back along the road. Seemed so glad to see us she came running into our arms. Couldn't talk two words of sense—something bad her bad scared. Now I see it was her own bogey tales."

"She's a servant here," explained Ionor in a tight voice. "She had been given the night off, and I had supposed she would spend it with friends in the village near here." She jerked her hand toward the kitchen, and Greshha dumbly followed her gesture.

Meanwhile Eriall, one of Pleddis's lieutenants whose face Weed knew, had carried in a grisly burden. "Here they are," he announced holding out both fists. Clenched by their scarlet-spattered hair, three heads dangled from his grip. Their jaws hung loosely, tongues lolling, eyes rolled upward in a fish stare behind half-closed lids.

"Recognize your friends?" laughed Pleddis. "Eriall, you're dribbling blood all over your hostess's floor. Where's your manners?"

The other grinned and showed the heads to Weed. "Maybe this piece of shit ought to lick the boards clean."

"Too bad the one's skull is busted near in half," mused Pleddis,

mourning a damaged trophy. "Well, pack them good in salt with the others. They bring us five ounces of gold each in Nostoblet, and I doubt the Merchants' League will care if their purchases are a bit damaged in transit. Mind you cut off that earring there."

"Why don't I just take along his while I'm doing the rest?" suggested Eriall.

Pleddis stroked his jaw thoughtfully. "How about that, Weed? Want to ride back to Nostoblet all packed in salt? They set twenty ounces of gold on your head, but maybe they'll pay a little extra if we hand you over intact. You'd rate a public execution all to yourself. Be real nice. Which way do you want it now?"

"Let me kill him," snarled Ionor.

Pleddis considered her gravely. "Bloodthirsty is the lust of a woman," he misquoted. "But I'd like to carry one back alive to Nostoblet, so he can tell everyone there how Captain Pleddis ran them down and made raven food out of the whole damned wolfpack."

Ionor's face was twisted, her breath fast. Weed thought of a hot-clefted slut who had been cheated of her climax. "Hang him from the railing then for me—I want to watch him die. It's my right. You caught them in my inn. You might still be trailing them if they hadn't stopped here."

Pleddis seemed to be weakening. "They might pay extra if he's alive."

"I've given you food and lodging here," argued Ionor. "The extra gold will be less than payment."

"But you owe me your lives for saving you from Kane's men," Pleddis pointed out. The game amused him.

"Should I add Kane's head to the others?" broke in Eriall.

"Not when they'll pay me five hundred ounces of gold for Kane," Pleddis brayed. "For that I'll bring in the whole carcass. Bad as they want Kane, they'll likely pickle him in brine and put him on display. Bet they could charge admission just to see him. Bet they will, in fact!"

"No, it's cold enough we can sling him over a horse, and he'll last until we can get back to Nostoblet. They won't care what he smells like there. Stundorn, take a few men and drag Kane's body down here. We'll leave him in the stables where the frost will keep him from getting ripe too fast. Watch that the dogs don't get at him."

They had left Kane where he lay when they found him dead. Several minutes had passed since then, in the confused aftermath of Pleddis's attack on the inn. But now the captain's attention returned to the prize quarry of his hunt. Stundorn and some others disappeared up the stairs.

"Weed, I'm still not sure what to do with you," he continued.

"Hang him," Ionor pleaded, her memory reliving a scene eight years back. A memory of familiar faces turning purple, of limbs thrashing a death dance from an impromptu gallows, while murder-crazed animals roared in laughter below.

"I suppose I can grant the request of a handsome lady," gallantly remarked Pleddis, thinking that his hostess had a definite beauty beneath the harsh mask of hatred.

Weed forced himself to speak with scornful assurance.

"Grant it and be damned. I can't hope for any better in Nostoblet. And I'll die with the secret of Kane's hidden cache of loot."

It was a foolish bluff, he realized in panic. But against imminent death, any respite would offer hope.

"Well, now..." began Pleddis, his eyes lighting with sudden interest.

Stundorn burst onto the balcony, his bearing totally shaken.

"Kane's gone!" he blurted.

V

To Chase the Dead

Kane breathed a silent curse as his boot slipped from its purchase on the limestone wall. For an instant he swung precariously in the darkness, only the steel grip of his fingers against the stone block saving him from a thirty-foot drop to the frosted earth below. The fall might not kill him, but it was crippling height for surety. Grimly he forced his scrambling boot back into a masonry crack and rested his arms from the tearing weight of his massive frame. His great strength now seemed scarcely sufficient to stand upright, and his wounded side was lancing agony—but at least the strain and the chill air had cleared his thoughts somewhat.

From the open window above him, Kane heard the startled shouts of Pleddis's soldiers. Baffled rage flamed within him. He had needed more time to descend the wall of the inn. Weakened as he was, he could never reach the ground before a frantic search revealed him to his enemies. Again his boot slipped as he

sought to hurry his descent. The limestone blocks of the inn had been set flush in the wall originally—a precaution against athletic thieves or guests who cared not to settle their account. Only because mountain winds and winters had eroded the masonry over the years was Kane able to find purchase—such purchase as there was.

Not even extreme exhaustion and the mists of opium had completely dulled Kane's uncanny senses. The feral instincts that countless times had drawn him from sleep to full awareness of imminent danger had called to him once again. Kane had awakened to the brief clamour of Pleddis's attack, and almost instantly he had understood his position.

Even at peak condition Kane would have stood no chance against a score of seasoned mercenaries. And he knew he was trapped—knew without wasting a glance outside that a man of Pleddis's capability would have surrounded Raven's Eyrie before thrusting within. In another minute his enemies would be smashing down his door—unless he decided to make a suicidal rush down the stairs, or let an archer pick him off as he scrambled down the outside wall.

A desperate plan came to him then. Pleddis knew he was gravely injured. He would let the bounty hunter find him dead. Any number of risks suggested themselves to him instantly, but plainly there was no other course. Pleddis would lower his guard only if he believed his quarry dead.

It was not too difficult for one of Kane's knowledge. His appearance was ghastly enough for a corpse, and the cold draft through the window coupled with the chill sweat that had seized him would impart a convincing clamminess to his flesh. Over the centuries Katie had delved deeply into all manner of occult studies, and the discipline of imposing mental control over physical functions was known to students far less adept than Kane. For much of their ride, Kane had held himself in a near

trance to conserve his strength, and now he withdrew his consciousness into a deeper coma, rigidly controlling breath and heart beat to so low air ebb as to appear lifeless to Pleddis's inspection.

Several minutes after his enemies had quit his bedside, Kane returned to full awareness. He realized he now had only a few minutes to escape—a short interval once Pleddis had ordered his men from their surveillance of the inn. They would celebrate the success of their lone hunt; for a moment all would be jubilant confusion. Then for any of a hundred reasons someone would return to the dead man upstairs. By then Kane must be gone.

He had cut it close. Too close. Kane had barely lowered himself through the window when Stundorn entered the room. In another instant their stunned fright would leave them. Someone would peer out the open window.

And he could never reach the ground in time. Quickly Kane took the only course left to him. Another window was close at hand. Recklessly Kane clawed his way to the darkened aperture. Somehow he managed to maintain a hold long enough to rest his weight on the ledge. He pushed at the lattice.

It was secured.

Kane bit his lip and tore a knife from his belt. He jammed its blade into the crack between window and casement. His movements seemed panic-driven, but his haste was that of one experienced in his task. In only a few seconds the latch snapped free.

Swinging open the heavy lattice, Kane squeezed through the window. No sooner had his cloak and sword scabbard cleared the ledge than a shout from close by signalled that someone had looked outside.

"No one on the wall!" a soldier called out.

Kane grinned savagely and glared through the darkness of the room. He was not alone.

A small figure crouched on the room's narrow bed. Her wide eyes were almost luminous as she stared at him—a huge, menacing figure outlined in the moonlight at her window,

"Are you alive?" she whispered. His appearance was supernatural, and she had been listening to the shouts outside her door.

Kane made no comment. He had swung into the child's room, and he remembered that the door was locked from outside. His dagger still shone in his hand. "Don't make a sound!" he hissed.

Klesst's voice was grave. "I won't tell them you're here," she said, "Father."

"I remember one time down along the coast," Pleddis said, staring into the empty room. "It was late fall, and we were making camp for the night. Dragging in driftwood for a fire, and one of the outfit hauls loose a big snag—and there's a swamp adder thick as your arm, all laid out and sluggish with cold. Kid was from the coast, knew what he had, so he just laid into it with the stick of wood he was carrying, not even wasting time to pull his sword. Must of hit it fifty times, till the stick busted and the snake was half flattened out. Had to be dead; we didn't think any more about it.

"Long about the end of second watch we all woke up—Vaul, it was a scream to chill your guts! There was the kid flopping out of his blanket roll, that damn black snake with its fangs buried in his neck. Hell, its head was bigger than your fist and full of venom, and I don't guess the kid lived long enough for us to stir up the fire.

"After that night I never trusted a dead snake. Always hack them to chunks, no matter how dead they look. Except just now,"

he concluded bitterly.

"He can't of got far," Eriall judged. "Hadn't had no time, and crippled up like he was."

Pleddis grunted and inspected the window casement. Lanterns flashed from the ground below. "What do you see?" he called down.

Nattios bawled back, "Nothing. No marks below. We're looking along the wall."

The mountaineer was no fool at tracking, Pleddis knew. "Well, look closer. There's blood on the ledge here."

"No. Nothing," came the reply after a pause.

"There's rocks down there," Eriall said, craning his squat neck to look down.

"Yeah, and there's frost, too," Nattios retorted gruffly. "Good as sand for leaving tracks. Ain't nothing."

"Well, Kane couldn't have crawled down that wall, anyway," the stocky lieutenant declared. "Mail that big couldn't scale these stones even if he wasn't busted up. The blood's a false trail."

Pleddis's laugh returned. It was not pleasant. "Kane could have done it. He's not lying in bed there. He either went out the window or out the door. I got men at every exit, so if there's no tracks outside lie has to be hiding inside. Won't do him any good, because we'll find him."

"Could be he got out somewhere else, mixed his trail in with our tracks," Eriall persisted. "We came in from all around the sides, you know."

"Could be. But I figure Kane didn't have the time to do anything too fancy. He's hiding in here somewhere. If he's not,

we'll pick up his trail with the dogs they got here. Long as we keep him from the horses, he won't get far."

Stundorn's stubbled face was strange. "Captain, you're sure he was just faking he was dead, then?"

Pleddis glared at him. "Dead men don't run out on you." Abruptly he scowled. "Unless some bastard slipped back and stole the corpse for the bounty!" He thought carefully. "No, I can account for all of us, and for the bunch that stay here, too. Still, if I find some bastard's pulling a fast one, there's going to be one more head in that salt pack, and it won't cost the Merchants' League a copper!"

But Stundorn remembered that his quarrel was supposed to have given Kane his death wound. "All the same, captain, it's the Demonlord's Moon. They say his powers hold sway over the mountains tonight. Maybe he could make the dead rise. And there's all kinds of black legends about Kane. We may be trailing a dead man, captain."

Pleddis stood a moment, face impassive. Then his laugh barked rustily. "Maybe so, Stundorn. But you just remember that corpse is worth five hundred ounces of yellow gold, and if he comes looking for you, just yell for me."

"Father!" exploded Kane, in a louder tone than he intended. He crossed the room to the girl's bed.

"Yes," Klesst whispered. "I saw you come in, and they said you were Kane. The children in the village call me Kane's bastard. They say you carried Mother away after you raided the inn, and after she escaped and came back she had me, and you were my father."

Kane stared at her.

"See. I have red hair like yours, and my eyes are blue like

yours." Klesst did not flinch from Kane's stare. "I can even see in the dark better than the other children, like the stories tell about you."

"Your grandmother," Kane muttered, touching the child's face.

"So I won't tell those soldiers where you are," Klesst concluded.

"You should hate me." Her skin was feverish. As was his.

"No," declared Klesst. "The others hate me. But when they hear stories about you, then they look frightened. I like to see them frightened. I like to think they're even a little frightened of me."

Kane shook his head. The excited shouts of his pursuers brought him back to the moment. Turning from her, he risked a glance through the window. Outside they were circling the inn with torches and lanterns. He knew they would find no trail. Then they would begin to search the inn. Digging grime from his boots, he smudged over the bright scratches made by his knife on the latch. There was no smear of blood on the casement that he could see.

Grimly he took stock of his chances. They were not good. All that his ruse had accomplished was to give him another few minutes. The end was inevitable, unless he could slip through their net. And even then...

Kane forced his mind to think clearly. For the moment, the threat of certain death had spurred him from exhaustion. Some final reserve of strength kept him moving when he should lie senseless, pushed back the black waves of fever and opium. The barricades must soon break.

"I knew you from my dream," his daughter told him. "But then

I didn't know your name."

About to warn her to be silent, Kane stopped. "How can you dream of someone you've never seen?" he wondered, somewhat in awe of the child. Seeing her brought memories that he cared not to linger upon just now.

"I saw you," Klesst insisted. "And another man, all in black with a great black cloak. He has a great black hound..."

Kane frantically signed for her to be silent. A number of men were coming down the hall. They were searching the rooms.

Kane's hand reached over his right shoulder, and the ancient blade of Carsultyal steel silently swung from its scabbard. It was a good weapon, Kane thought with grim pride. This one had been difficult to find—probably few like it still existed. Carsultyal lay buried by sand and sea and time. And the ancient city's last citizen would very shortly lie dead with its memory.

Again he glanced outside. They were watching from below. The soldiers in the hall—he might kill the first group to enter, but there were more to take their place, and Kane was trapped—wounded so that his last fight would not even be a good one.

The door was locked from outside. And there was Klesst. It might make them less thorough in their search; they would likely assume the child would cry out if Kane had somehow hidden inside her room.

A futile hope, probably. And the room was too small. Kane assumed it was one of the narrow single rooms for wealthy travellers who deigned not to share quarters with other guests. Such accommodations cost dear and were cramped, but at least a well-to-do traveller would not have to share a bed with three hog drovers.

The search was only a few doors away.

And there was no place to bide. Just a bare-timbered room. No chests, no tapestries. Kane's huge frame could never squeeze under Klesst's tiny bed. There was a closet. That in itself marked the room as once a luxury accommodation. Kane swung open its door. The closet was surprisingly large, considering the economy of space that an inn demanded. An oddly dank smell came from within. A few nondescript items of clothing hung from pegs along the interior.

It was worth a chance. At any event, Kane decided, when they opened the door he would hurl himself out, with luck cut down a couple of them before they could meet his rush. It was better than standing there like a condemned man in the middle of his death cell.

"What's your name?" he asked suddenly.

"Klesst."

"Well, Klesst, I'm going to step inside your closet. I want you to pull this latch down from outside, and then get back in bed. When the soldiers come in, just tell them no one's been in here. And if they don't believe you and look inside... well, afterwards you can tell them that I said I'd hurt you unless you did as I told you."

Klesst nodded, impressed by the important task he had given her. She smiled uncertainly as she shut the closet, then quickly shot the latch. She barely had time to scurry back to bed before they came to her door.

"This is the kid's room," someone observed. "Been locked."

"Well, open it, anyway," ordered a gruff voice.

A scraping of the bolt, then suspicious faces peered in from the hall.

The gruff voice belonged to a paunchy man with thick shoulders and a rolling gait. He carried an arbalest, his fingers near the trigger. "Hey, kid," he demanded, "anybody come in here?"

"No, sir," Klesst said, being polite to make him trust her.

Their eyes carefully searched the shadows of the room. "You sure?"

"Yes, sir."

"You been awake?"

"Yes, sir."

"You sure you ain't been asleep?"

"No... I mean, yes, sir."

The man with the arbalest entered the room. Several other men followed. Swords were bare in their fists.

A thin-faced mercenary examined the window. "It's locked, Stundorn. No sign of blood or anything," he stated in a nasal voice.

Stundorn shifted his arbalest. Klesst wondered why the steel bow didn't snap its string. "Might have been open before. This room is below Kane's, off to the side only a little. He might have climbed down."

He frowned at Klesst. "You see anything, kid?"

"No, sir."

"You wouldn't lie now, would you?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know what happens to little girls who lie?"

"Yes, sir." Klesst's imagination grappled with the possibilities.

"And you haven't seen any sign of a big bandit with blood just pouring down his ribs where I shot him?"

"No, sir."

"Closet's latched from outside," someone noted.

"Now you aren't hiding my bandit inside your closet, are you?" Stundorn rumbled.

"No, sir." *What did happen to little girls who lied?*

"Do you know I got an itchy nose?"

"No, sir."

"It's a fact. My nose itches every time I hear a lie." Klesst stared in horrid fascination.

"Now why do you suppose it's itching right now?"

"I don't know, sir," she answered shakily.

Stundorn stood back from the closet door. He brought his arbalest to his shoulder, sighted about chest height on the door. His fingers curled over its trigger.

"Now open that door, Profaka," he directed the thin-faced mercenary.

Gingerly Profaka reached across to the latch and drew it back.

He yanked open the door.

The closet was empty.

"This place is clean," Eriall informed his leader. "Been through it from attic to cellar, looked in every hole bigger than a chamber pot. Ain't no Kane, and that's a fact."

Pleddis nodded tiredly. He had overseen most of the work. "Yeah, and no one made a break for the outside; I had men out there watching every block of stone on this inn."

The captain banged his fist on the wall in anger. "Obviously, then, Kane somehow got outside before we realized his trick."

"But how? We pretty well proved he had to be inside."

"Well, we damn well just proved he's not inside! Now you tell me where that leaves us!"

Eriall was silent. He massaged his shaven skull. Pleddis's laugh startled him.

"Sure, I know what he did!" His white teeth flashed in a grin. "You just got to think like Kane thinks. Now Kane's smart, and he's got a lot of tricks. He went out the window, sure, but he didn't climb down. That's what he knew we'd think he'd do. So instead Kane climbed up! He was on the top floor, so getting to the roof was actually easier than climbing all the way to the ground."

"Kane must have worked his way along the roof up to where it abuts the burned-out north wing. Then he just climbed down onto the old walls and groped his way down into the gutted interior, and slipped through the rubble and into the night—while we were standing like fools wondering where his body had got to!"

"Then he's had a good start all this time we been looking under beds!" Eriall growled.

"Maybe," Pleddis admitted, still pleased with his cleverness. "But Kane don't have a horse. Wounded and on foot we'll run him down in an hour. Nattios! Find Ionor and tell her we'll need dogs for tracking! Hurry! What's the matter?"

"We're going to track Kane now?" the mountaineer queried uneasily. "It will soon be midnight. The Demonlord will hunt—"

"Move, damn you!" Pleddis hissed. "Yes, we're going to track him! Do you want the Demonlord to catch him? Lord Tloluvin don't need that gold!"

"Don't speak his name!" Nattios gasped. Seeing the vicious anger rise in Pleddis's eyes, he ran to find Ionor.

VI

In Seven Years You'll Hear a Bell...

Ionor turned on Greshha with thinly checked fury. "Why did you come back? I told you to take tonight off."

They were alone in the inn's great kitchen. Shouts close by told of Pleddis's fast-moving search of the rambling structure. The two drovers had joined in, and Ionor had ordered Cholos and Mauderas to help the mercenaries—even directing Sele to guide the searchers through the huge inn. Ionor felt certain Kane would be found if he were hiding within the walls of Raven's Eyrie. If not...

Her jaw tightened as she scowled at the older woman. Greshha was avoiding her eyes. "I said, why didn't you stay away?"

The servant woman took a deep breath. Her thick body shook. "I guess I know you didn't want me here," she mumbled, face downcast.

"What did you say?"

Greshha raised her chin; her eyes were shrewd. "I guess I know why you wanted me to stay away tonight," she stated in a louder voice, defiantly.

A hiss escaped Ionor's tightly drawn lips. She started to swing back her hand, then checked her arm. "What are you talking about?" Her voice was like a slap.

"I'm no fool. I can remember," Greshha stolidly told her. "I know you hate the child."

Ionor's long fingers clenched and opened, like a pantheress flexing her claws. She tossed her head, and her loose braid flicked over her shoulder, twitched down her back like an angry black tail.

The stout mountain woman did not quail before her mistress's obvious look of menace. "Poor Klesst. I can't blame you for hating her when she came. But after all these years! I kept taking care of her when it was your place, hoping you'd learn to love her. But you never did, Ionor. There's no loving left in you—only hate. Hate's eaten the soul out of your breast, so you can't even love your own flesh..."

"Shut up, you fat fool! I've tolerated your meddling, but you've overstepped your place this time!"

"I never thought you'd go through with it. All this time I kept thinking you'd soften to her. But you're cold, burned out, Ionor. There's no heart left in you. I know now you mean to do it."

Ionor drew back against the cutting table, her lips twisted in a snarl. "What are you talking about?"

Ducking her head for breath, Greshha plunged on. Her round face took on an aspect of sullen determination. "I was here when you were birthing her, don't forget. I stayed with you when your

screams and curses drove everyone else from your bed. I held you down and tried to comfort you when the midwife had to use the knife to bring her forth from your womb. And even while you screamed out things to make the gods turn away from you, I stayed with you and pitied you because no one thought you could live through the night.

"Seven years ago tonight, it was, Ionor. And they all said it was a miracle when both you and the child lived through. But only I knew what kind of miracle it was."

"You're an old fool, Greshha!"

"Old, but no fool. The things you was screaming weren't good to cry out—not with the Demonlord's Moon shining down through your window. They weren't good to hear, and that's why the others drew away from you that night. I'll confess it, I was afraid myself, and when the child was born, and the midwife had done what she could, and we thought the opium would let you ease into sleep... Well, I left you, too, and told myself to look to the child because her mother would be gone by daybreak.

"Then when the dogs began to howl and cringe, and the others all huddled by the fire and prayed... I couldn't leave you alone to die, not when the fires all burned low and blue under the shadows. I crept back to your room, praying each step, and afraid to think what it was we heard snuffling outside the inn.

"And I stopped at your door when I heard your voice, and when I heard that other voice answer, I knew who you was talking with, and I knew it was worse than death to open your door. I just froze there too scared to tremble, and the words you two spoke burned into my memory like hot iron into flesh. And after *he* left, I still stood there crying and praying and not making a sound. And when I finally took heart to look in the door, I saw you lying there asleep with a black smile on your lips, and I knew your strength would be back in the morning.

"But before the gods, Ionor, I never thought you'd do it! I swear I would have smothered you there as you lay if I had believed that. I kept thinking, she'll learn to love once she's held the child to her breast and she forgets the horror and the shame and the pain. But you never held the child to your breast, and you never learned to love her—because all that's left in you is hate, Ionor.

"So I knew why you wanted me gone tonight, and that's why I wouldn't go. And I'll not go. I'll not let you do it."

"You meddling old fool!" spat Ionor. "If you dare interfere... But what can you do?"

Greshha expanded her shoulders truculently. "There's soldiers here. Captain Pleddis has League authority. He won't let you do this thing."

Ionor laughed. "Pleddis is a cold-blooded bounty killer. His soldiers are hired thugs. He'll not care what I do. He only wants Kane."

"Maybe so. I guess I'll find out what he'll do."

"Don't be a bigger fool!"

Maybe he'll be interested if I tell him he might not get Kane."

"I'm warning you!"

Greshha looked at her livid face and backed away. No longer was there doubt in her mind; instead there was fear. The servant woman started for the door to the Common room; she could hear heavy boots approaching from there.

As she turned, Ionor's hand came away from the cutting table. The sharpening steel in her fist made a rotten crunch as she brought it down over Greshha's skull. The mountain woman crumpled to the floor with no more sound than a dropped sack of

grain.

Ignoring the huddled body' Ionor glared at the door. She had acted out of desperate rage, without forethought. And someone was entering the kitchen.

It was Mauderas. He halted at the threshold in surprise. His hulking figure blocked the doorway; behind him stretched the inn's bar, and beyond she could see several of Pleddis's men moving through the common room.

"Close that door!" she hissed. "Lock it!"

Mauderas obeyed, a stunned expression on his dark face. "What happened?"

"Never mind," Ionor told him. "I had to stop her from talking to Pleddis."

"She dead?"

"I think so. We can't let them find her."

Mauderas licked his mustache and surveyed the room. The outer doors were barred, but Pleddis's men were watching from outside. Fortunately the windows were shuttered on the back wall. No one had seen... yet.

"I don't see what Pleddis would care about—"

"Don't forget Captain Pleddis is a lawman!" she snapped. "Maybe he wouldn't use his authority, maybe he would. No point in tempting luck. I don't want to fool around with that bounty hunter right now. We'll have to hide her body—tell them she went back to the village, if anyone asks."

"How? She's too big to stuff under something, and Pleddis's men are all over the place. Someone's going to want to come in here any minute. They can't turn up Kane anywhere, and Pleddis

was about to tear up the floorboards looking for hiding places."

"I know; they came through here twice before. Does it look like Kane left the inn, then?"

Mauderas nodded. "Pleddis figured out how. They'll be out scouring the ridges next."

Ionor thought carefully for a moment and came to a decision. "Then we'll do it the old way. Take her out the passage and sink her. That way it's certain they won't find her."

Mauderas put a broad hand on her shoulder. "Been a long time since I sunk anyone."

"I feel confident you haven't lost your touch."

"Passage hasn't been opened since the raid. Thought you wanted to forget the old days, keep the passage closed up."

"I know what I said. But I don't want to risk complications with Pleddis."

Mauderas shrugged. "Anyway you call it then, Ionor."

Stooping over the limp body, he arranged the loose limbs with the calm competence of one who knows his task. With a grunt he rose up again, Greshha's lax figure slung across his broad back. "The old woman weighs more than a side of beef," he grumbled.

But Ionor had left him. Descending the steps to the wine cellar, she paused to grasp a portion of the railing. With a sharp tug, the upright swung out from the banister like a lever. It was a lever. Somewhere below a counterbalance released, and a large section of the flagstone cellar floor rumbled smoothly into the outer wall.

A square of blackness opened in the cellar floor, from which a stale, damp wind welled up. It was like a breath from some

slumbering behemoth. Indeed, the sound of muffled breathing seemed to emanate from within—a distant rushing moan.

Stairs of greasy limestone descended into the gloom. Mauderas took a lamp from Ionor, holding it clumsily under the weight of his burden. He eyed the passage doubtfully.

"Hurry! I think I hear someone calling for me!"

Mauderas grunted and put a boot on the top step. "Oh, I'll hurry. But I'll hurry back to keep you warm tonight."

Ionor made an impatient gesture. "Stay there for a while before you return to the inn—and leave by the other way. They'll believe me if I say you went to walk Greshha part way to the village. And later no one will question a disappearance on Demonlord's Moon."

"Any way you call it, honey," Mauderas drawled, his ice rising from the darkness. "I'll be along to keep you warm directly..."

Hurriedly Ionor swung the lever back to its upright position. The section of flagstones grated back into place. Pounding on the kitchen door was thunderous as she emerged from the cellar.

"Sorry. I was getting brandy," she explained, unbolting the door to admit Nattios and several of his fellows. "With that devil running loose, a lady likes to keep herself locked in safe."

VII

Raven's Secret

Satisfied that no bones were broken, Kane struggled to his feet. He would limp badly, but his high boots had reinforced his ankles so that the shock of impact had not resulted in a disabling sprain or worse. Or worse. He massaged his aching shoulder; his right arm had almost been torn from its socket. But by all rights he should be lying here with a broken neck.

Kane looked about him, reconstructing what had happened now that the scarlet bursts of pain were receding from his consciousness.

When Klesst had fastened the closet door, Kane had stepped back against its wall. He had a vague impression of reaching to steady himself. His groping fingers closed on something—had it been one of the pegs?—that had swung inward with his shove.

Then the section of closet floor on which he stood dropped away, and Kane felt himself plunging through darkness. Blindly he struck out. His fingers closed on wood—the rung of a ladder. But the rotted wood tore away under the wrenching force of Kane's three hundred pounds of bone and muscle.

Spun about by the jarring contact, Kane desperately clawed at the wall. Other mildewed rungs smashed against his grasp,

splintered under his weight. But it was enough to check his hurtling body. Kane's steel-tendoned fingers locked onto the flashing rungs, almost bringing his fall short. Then the dragging mass of his body proved more than the weakened timbers could withstand. The ladder tore loose from its anchorage to the wall and careened to the stones below.

It had been enough to break his fall, Kane dropped the final eight or ten feet and struck the stones on his feet, the wreckage of the ladder splintering beneath him.

He lay for several minutes, semiconscious after the stunning impact. Above him stretched a seemingly endless shaft of blackness. Kane had no clear idea of how far he had fallen. He was in a chamber beneath the cellars of Raven's Eyrie. Klesst's room must be at least fifty feet above—probably more, since the sound of his fall seemed to have brought no response from his pursuers.

Patches of skin were abraded from his hands, and he dug out several large splinters. Gingerly he flexed his fingers, found they were otherwise uninjured. A smile twitched his bleeding lips, for a man with crippled hands was more helpless than if he had broken his leg. Casting about, he found his sword, its point buried inches in the damp limestone. He drew it out, reflecting he had narrowly missed being impaled on its tempered steel.

Once more he gazed up the pitch-dark shaft. He had triggered a trapdoor in the rear of the closet, somewhere above. Obviously a counterbalance had sprung the trap shut once again, otherwise he would see light and puzzled faces would be staring down at him. A ladder was anchored to one wall of the shaft, though it appeared unlikely he would be able to climb back up after the destruction his fall had caused.

Kane had just begun to form a guess as to the shaft's purpose, when he heard a grating rumble overhead. Light suddenly washed

down from the roof of the chamber some fifty feet to his left. A section of stone had slid open, revealing a long flight of stone steps. Voices trickled down.

Baring his teeth in a snarl—*Had Pleddis's hound s sniffed him out even in this lost hole?* —Kane concealed himself behind a massive stone column. Sword in bleeding fist, he waited.

Instead of the anticipated rush of mercenaries, Kane saw only one man descend the steps—and then the door overhead slid shut. His eyes narrowed in calculation. The man he recognized as one of Ionor's servants; the dead woman he carried slung over his back Kane had never seen before. This turn of events was a mystery to him. More to the point, it meant that his presence here had not been discovered—on the contrary, the brawny servant seemed intent on a task which demanded secrecy.

The newcomer carried a lantern in his fist. Its light was hardly sufficient to disclose the walls of the chamber—tens of yards across, and in places shared and vaulted, Evidently the room was a natural cavern which at one time had been roughly restructured to serve as a hidden cellar. A damp breeze ghosted through the darkness, causing the lantern flame to dance, and Kane noted a narrow passage leading out of the cellar's far wall.

Mauderas glanced about the hidden cellar, his face showing more fear than suspicion. This was a place where countless dark crimes had bloodied the stones. It was not a wholesome spot to linger, particularly on the night of Demonlord's Moon.

"What the hell!" he muttered, raising his lantern suddenly He tensed as the feeble light picked out the splintered ends of the ladder, pointing in all directions like the half-flexed fingers of a dead man's hand. The woman's body slid from his shoulders with a heavy flopping sound.

"That wasn't so rotten it would of collapsed by itself,"

Mauderas thought aloud. Drawing his sword, he shuffled toward the wreckage, the lantern thrust before him like a shield.

Which left him blind to anything outside the close circle of its light. As he crept past, Kane leaped from the shadow of the pillar. Mauderas sensed his rush and started to turn. Kane's heavy blade sheared off half his face as it passed down through his neck.

The lantern smashed against the floor. A pool of flame licked over the damp stone. Grotesque shadows writhed over the nitre-frosted walls, mocking killer and slain, as Kane wiped his blade clean of the dead man's gore.

"Kane..." A rasping voice called to him.

He spun on his heels, a curse exploding from his throat.

"Kane... is it you?" the eerie voice whispered.

Kane stalked toward the sound. In the rippling light he saw that the woman Mauderas had carried had raised herself weakly.

He knelt at her side. "I'm Kane," he told her, noting the blood that matted her hair.

Her ashen face was lax; her arms quivered spasmodically. Seemingly she had barely strength left to whisper. "The child, Kane... Save Klesst... She may be of your seed, but she's innocent."

"Why is Klesst in any danger, old woman?"

"Ionor... She birthed her seven years ago tonight... Nothing but hate in her... She called out to him for vengeance that night..."

"Called out to whom?"

"I heard him at her bedside... His black hound was clawing at our door... The Demonlord came to her..."

Only willpower held life in the mountain woman's dying flesh. All strength had left her—only her eyes and lips showed trembling movement, like the final flickering of a lampwick when no more oil remains. Her voice was trailing off, and Kane anxiously bent his ear to her face.

"The Demonlord bargained with her that night. In seven years he'd draw you back to Raven's Eyrie. In seven years he'd come with his hound to drag your living flesh down to Hell. Ionor would see her vengeance fulfilled—but the price would be the child. Ionor must take Klesst to Raven's Bald where the Demonlord and his black hound wait. She must give the hellhound your spoor by throwing the child into its maw..."

"Then the black hound will come for you Kane, to drag your evil soul down to everlasting torment in its master's realm... and there's no place you can hide from the hound of Hell! It's no worse than you deserve, but the child's done no wrong. Don't let her sacrifice Klesst... There's naught but hate in—"

Greshha's whisper was no longer audible. Kane shook her still form, intent on learning more. And now her eyes and lips were fixed and silent. As they would be forevermore.

The pool of flaming oil crept into tiny islands of fire that one by one snapped and died. Kane arose from the dead woman, and the chamber was once more in darkness.

He stood wondering for a moment, while his uncanny eyes adapted somewhat to the thick gloom. Numbness was stealing over his body. Fighting the pain and exhaustion that clouded his perception and dragged at his limbs, Kane limped toward the passage at the opposite wall. The damp and softly moaning breath issuing from the blackness indicated the passage must lead outward—and Kane had no desire to return to the inn, even if he could gain entrance without discovery.

The passage was cramped, with walls and floor of irregular masses of limestone. Kane judged that portions of the rock had been broken away to enlarge the natural tunnel. He had begun to form an idea of the hidden cellar's function, and when he reached the end of the passage, his suspicions were confirmed.

The tunnel opened onto a narrow ledge, jutting mid-way from the limestone bluff below Raven's Eyrie. The River Cotras rushed thunderously beneath the mists another hundred feet down. Close by the mouth of the passage lay a pile of fist-sized stones and broken rubble—harmless enough, but Kane read a more sinister interpretation.

Before the raid, Raven's Eyrie had been a prosperous caravanserai. But Ionor's family had gathered its great Wealth by darker harvests than the hosting of trail-weary travellers. Kane suddenly realized that he had uncovered the chilling secret of Raven's Eyrie.

Such inns of terror were not rare along desolate roads through untilled wilderness. Kane had encountered them on occasion, although never on so grand a scale as Raven's Eyrie, whose dark secret had never been suspected. He wondered how many other hidden passages opened into guest's rooms like the one he had unwittingly stood over and tripped. How many black crimes, what heaps of stolen riches, had this hidden cellar known? Studying the cairn of fist-sized rocks, Kane thought of nameless travellers who had been secretly dragged from their beds to this unhallowed cellar, where here, their bellies ripped open and weighted with stones, their corpses were thrown from the ledge to sink forever in the deep current far below.

No doubt their disappearance, if noted, would have been laid to marauding gangs of outlaws; some of the crimes Kane bitterly reflected, were probably laid to his name. But now the passage showed evidence of long disuse, and Kane wondered why. Did wealthy travellers no longer risk these trails; were their guests too

few to disappear without notice? Or was Ionor of a less murderous temperament than her predecessors here? Remembering the hatred in her eyes tonight, Kane doubted this last.

He dismissed the matter; it was of no concern. Instead there was Pleddis to deal with. And the words of the dying woman. Truth or madness? Kane dared not disregard her whispered warning. He knew the power of hate.

Klesst—he must get to Klesst. For the child was the key to the doom Ionor intended for him. But the ladder in the shaft was hopelessly damaged; even if Kane could somehow bridge the missing section, he doubted that it would bear his weight. And Pleddis held the inn. There were other secret doors, he knew, but it would be impossible to evade detection if he returned to the inn. His escape from there had taken the limit of his strength and guile—and then it was chance that had saved him. He could not hope for this a second time.

Kane's head felt light, dizzy. It was death to get to Klesst. But if he could not reach the child, Ionor would seat her pact with the Demonlord. Then Pleddis and his hired killers would show him far greater mercy than the doom which would certainly claim him.

It was hard to concentrate. Kane's strength ebbed, as pain and fatigue racked his flesh, fever and drug mists swirled through his brain. Raven's Knob, the old woman had whispered—there Ionor was to seal her unhallowed bargain. Kane had a memory of that jutting, spur of barren rock and lightning-blasted trees. Rising from the bleak crest of a high ridge, it was a landmark in the region and the setting for any number of dark legends. No sane man would approach Raven's Knob when the Demonlord's Moon rose behind it. Possibly not even Pleddis could force his men to carry their search to its slopes.

Ionor would take Klesst there. Kane knew he must reach Raven's Knob first. But he had no idea how much time remained to him. He had heard Ionor's voice when Mauderas entered the hidden cellar. Very little time had passed. Ionor, however, would take a straight course for Raven's Knob. Kane, weakened and uncertain of the path, must elude Pleddis's searchers in order to reach the point. And the night held dangers far more sinister than mercenary steel.

There was no other way. Cold anger seethed in Kane's heart. He had been driven across the land, ensnared in this deadly web, each step of his course seemingly predetermined. He would not be the blind pawn in some dark game fate played.

The ledge seemed to twist downward at a steep slant from the mouth of the passage. Clumps of laurel anchored to cracks and folds in the almost sheer face of the bluff; their roots held crumbling shelves of soil and broken rock. They were treacherous footholds under the best conditions; tonight Kane could not imagine worse. Presumably, though, he could work his way to the riverbank along this deadly pretense of a path. If he slipped...

There was no other way.

Fighting the weakness that gnawed at him, the vertigo that already blurred his mind, Kane set his boots against the slippery ledge.

VIII

And That Will Be Your Call to Hell...

"Stundorn, you know better than to hit an unconscious man," Pleddis told him. "Wait until he comes to again so he can feel it!" He threw back his head with braying laughter.

The paunch-gutted mercenary spat and unwound the cestus from his fist. "May be a while."

"He'll keep," grinned Pleddis, critically studying Weed's broken face. It took some of the frustrated pain from his belly to picture Kane hanging there instead.

Weed's battered body slowly spun about. The bandit's arms had been tied behind his back. Then a longer rope had been tied to his wrists, its other end wound around the balcony railing. They had hoisted him above the floor in this manner, his toes only inches from support. While he hung there, his shoulders threatening to tear from their sockets, Stundorn had worked him over with the cestus.

"When we come back with Kane, he'll tell us the truth about this cache of loot," Pleddis promised. "Because he knows this is just a taste of what will happen if he lies to us just once. Only way to make a man tell the truth when he expects death in return—you got to make him want to die."

He smiled jovially at Ionor. "Now he *is* going to be alive when I get back, isn't he?"

"This is better than killing him," she said flatly, watching Weed's tortured body as it slowly spun from the force of the last blow.

Pleddis laughed appreciatively. "Don't think I'd want you for my enemy—no, I don't! Well, then, we'll let you and that fat tavern keeper guard him close—and your man Mauderas when he comes back. Of course, I've got some of my men posted here inside, in case Kane doubles back, and there's more guarding the horses. Personally, I expect to find him crawling along the mountainside not even a mile from here, but with Kane you best keep all bets covered. He comes back, there's a welcome here for him."

A harried Nattios pounded in from outside. "Captain Pleddis, it's no use!" he blurted. "I can't do a damn thing with them hounds. You got to drag them out of their kennel, and then they just scrouch down on their bellies and whimper. Hell, one damn near chewed old Usporris's arm off trying to drag his tail back inside! They're too scared to piss, captain. They ain't good for so much as barking at a thief if he was to step over them—ain't no way we're going to use them to trail!"

"So." Pleddis shrugged his shoulders, affecting nonchalance he did not feel. "Then we trail without dogs. Didn't need them before now. I know damn well you can track a man on foot over this short a field."

He glared at the long-nosed mountaineer. "Unless you're too damn scared to do your job. And you and any others who feel that way know what I think about a man who won't do his job."

Nattios nodded unhappily. He knew. They all knew.

"Stundorn—you aren't afraid to chase down a fortune in

gold."

"No, captain," he lied, face pale beneath stubble beard.

"See, Nattios. Stundorn's not afraid."

"You find where Kane's trail leads off, I'll take you to him," Nattios promised sullenly.

"I'll hold you to your word." Pleddis's teeth gleamed brightly. "Now let's not waste any more time."

When the sounds of the hunters had been swallowed by the night, Ionor moved from the window and took down her hooded cloak. The dark brown wool would be almost invisible in the night, which was to her liking. An encounter with Pleddis's soldiers was something she wished to avoid—although it was not for Pleddis to question her coming and going, nor for any man to bold her back from the path she had set foot on seven years before.

Klesst's wide eyes greeted her when she opened the door. Perhaps if her eyes had not reminded her of Kane... if her hair had not been red like his...

"You're awake," Ionor stated in automatic reproof.

"I couldn't sleep with everything happening, Mother. And I've slept so much of the day." She wanted to ask if the soldiers had captured Kane, but she dared not show interest. But Kane was magic, for he had vanished from her closet. They couldn't catch a sorcerer, could they?

"That's all right. Put your clothes on now, Klesst. We're going to go for a short walk."

"Why, Mother? Tonight's the Demonlord's Moon." She felt a thrill of bewildered fright.

"That's all right. The soldiers will protect us from any bad things. The night air will break your fever. Just get dressed now."

"I think my fever is gone now." Could soldiers protect her from the black hound?

"Just get dressed."

She wondered if Mother had a surprise for her birthday. One of the girls in the village told her how she was taken out to the stable on the night of her birthday, and there was a baby colt just born, and she got to have him because he was born on her birthday. But Mother never gave her surprises on her birthday. Sometimes Greshha did, and pretended that they were gifts from Mother, too, but Klesst knew better, because once she saw Greshha embroidering the birthday skirt with her own hands.

"Did I hear one of the soldiers say that Greshha came back?"

"No, Klesst. Why are you dawdling?"

"Which skirt shall I wear, Mother?"

"It doesn't—Wear the dark blue one."

That was her best one. "Can I wear my good linen blouse?" Maybe it was a birthday surprise.

"Yes. Hurry, Klesst." Ionor fidgeted with her fingers, subconsciously seeking to speed her dressing, but not wanting to touch the girl. Her body felt tense as she watched Klesst hurry on her clothes, struggle to push her feet into buskins she had outgrown. She would need a new pair soon...

Ionor pushed the thought from her mind. It was too late to turn back; she knew that when Kane returned to Raven's Eyrie. Pleddis's appearance had made her think briefly that the Demonlord could be cheated of his bargain. Yet while this thought might have stirred a phantom of hope, far greater was her

anger at the chance that her vengeance would not be fulfilled. But the Demonlord would not be cheated. The game was his, and this was only another cat-and-mouse cruelty of his dark humor. She had struggled seven years to quell any love for the child, knowing the unholy bargain she had sworn to consummate. And yet, if Pleddis had taken Kane, might she have learned in time to...

Then surged stronger the screaming vision of seven years past—the death and horror of Kane's raid, the shame of her captivity, the tearing agony later in the ruins of her home...

"Mother , I'm ready now. Why is your face so strange?"
Wrapped in her woolen shawl, Klesst looked up at her anxiously.

Ionor shook her head and closed her eyes for a moment.
"Nothing's wrong, Klesst. Now come along quickly."

IX

Broken Barricades

The mass of laurel roots sagged beneath his weight. Bits of rock and humus crumbled away from where the bush anchored itself to the bluff. He heard the trickling sound of its fall. With painstaking care Kane transferred his weight to another shelf of rock and inched forward against the bluff. No handholds here—just the desperate pressure of his body against the bare

rock.

Mist rose from the river far below, breathing a damp film upon the slippery rocks. At times the mist completely obscured the tiny ledge Kane followed, so that he became uncertain which fragmentary path led down to the riverbank, or ended instead several yards beyond in a sheer drop. Time and again he had to backtrack over some perilous section of blind trail which moments before had required all his effort to negotiate. No longer was Kane sure whether he actually followed the path to the river—or even if such a trail existed. The fog held its secrets well, and often he had to rely solely on touch to discover the next foothold.

The mist writhed through his mind as well. Kane lost note of time; it seemed he had been crawling for ages across the treacherous bluff, never coming closer to either summit or base. And in truth he was lost. The rudimentary path he struggled along wormed across the escarpment above the River Cotras for miles beyond the point where Kane had hoped to descend. This path was only a broken ledge along a series of faults in the strata deadly trail no mountain man would attempt even by day. Pleddis, who was scouring the gravel beds between river and cliff, never considered that his wounded quarry would be rash enough to crawl along the escarpment where no path existed. And so Kane passed beyond the line of his pursuers, although the crumbling ledge that had saved him from capture threatened at any instant to cast him headlong into the mist-wreathed darkness.

He seemed to move in a dream. The mist crawled in phantom shapes; spectral hands clawed out to tear him from the ledge. Even the cold, sweating rock seemed unreal, insubstantial. Kane knew this was no dream, but he had to force himself to be aware of his reality. Otherwise he would lose concentration, no longer care whether a tangled clump of laurel would bear his weight or

crumble beneath his boot. He ground his bleeding hands against the rock and savagely pressed down on his limping ankle, using the pain to drive back the sense of dream.

But the phantoms waxed more substantial, the lichen-garbed stones less real. And no further could the agony of his body overcome the fever in his mind. Somehow Kane managed to lurch on toward where the ledge seemed to broaden—or was that, too, a trick of his faltering senses? Unable to determine, he sprawled heavily onto the dank shelf of rock.

His limbs were nerveless. His exhausted body ached for air, but his chest seemed too weakened to draw breath fast enough. Kane shuddered; great spasms shook his sweat-slimed frame.

He lay like one dead, while he fought to hold consciousness. Vertigo shivered through his brain. The ledge he pressed against tilted, spun away, dissolved...

And then the rocks dissolved.

And the stone became transparent, clearer than the finest diamond.

And the mountains opened to Kane.

And Kane looked within the mountains.

He saw the treasures of the hills locked in their crypts

He saw the treasures of the hills locked in their crypts of Primal stone—veins of gold and silver, raw gemstones, buried crowns, and chests of coins—and the grim guardians who watched over them.

He saw the graves of the hills, where forgotten skeletons mouldered into dust, and lost tombs whose corpses lay unquiet and imprisoned, and their rotted eyes burned with blue flames as they writhed to return his stare.

He saw the graveless dead of River Cotras—who had been claimed by the river's fury, who had thrown themselves into its flood in futile search for oblivion, who had been flung into its depths to hide the fruits of murder—white scattered bones, and current-tossed skulls, and moss-cruste d lairs for fishes and wriggling things.

He saw the lost mines of the ancients, and that which they mined and that which they buried—that which they sought after and did not find, and that which they feared and could not flee—and the knowledge made him close his eyes and cry out.

He saw caverns that crawled downward and downward, and the blind flapping things that dwelled within them—and the cities that were raised there, where no light would even burn—and the misshapen faces that peered fearfully from slitted windows in towers for which there were no doors.

He saw the black flames of the far abyss, toward which monstrous worms gnawed chaotic tunnels through the rock, seeking the flames of Hell, where as obscene moths they would burst forth to wheel and dart, until their smouldering wings would fail and they would plunge like meteors into the lake of fire.

He saw the hidden creatures of the mountains, risen from their secret dens to hunt by the Demonlord's Moon. Huge, bloated toads that hopped through the fog, flicking forth searching tongues from reeking jaws of acid-venomed fangs. Lonely abandoned cabins, inviting a traveller to shelter—that were neither cabins nor abandoned, and their invitation was not for refuge. Glowing-eyed creatures shaped somewhat like men, who ran on furred limbs, and showed wolves' fangs when they howled. Shambling giants like misshapen apes, yellow-toothed and shovel-taloned—some shaggy as bears, some scaled like snakes—bestial descendants of those who first claimed man's image. Creeping from caverns, naked creatures no longer quite human—filthy, scabrous packs of men, women and mewling

children, not half so hideous as the hunger that brought them forth. And that which follows lonely travellers in the dark of the woods, until at last they look behind, and in that moment die (Kane looked upon its face, and terror scarred his soul).

There were others...

And Kane moaned and gnawed his tongue, crushed his fists to his eyes. Until the visions faded into grey, and only the knowledge remained.

He opened his eyes. The rock was solid about him. The fever had broken.

And now a steaming, fetid breath snuffled his body. Eyes like red glowing stars stared balefully down upon his upturned face.

"No, Serberys," said a voice, "Kane is not ours... yet."

Kane snarled and flung himself aside. Larger and blacker than any bear of these mountains, the hound of Hell snarled back at him.

"Now we've spoiled his dream," came the sardonic laugh. "Were you dreaming, Kane?" The Demonlord's onyx-taloned hand rested on his bound's heckled neck. He stood tall and lean and muscular; his garments were black and finely cut to the current mode—full-sleeved shirt and tight trousers, knee boots of soft leather, and a long sword at his belt. A wide black cloak seemed to flap about his shoulders, but Kane knew it was not a cloak.

Kane glared at the majestically evil face and the unwinking black eyes. "If you've come for me, Sathonys, you'll find my steel as ready as ever."

The Demonlord smiled; mockery robbed his expression Of any warmth. "We've met on friendlier terms in past years, Kane. Why do you show your fangs now?"

"We'll play this game no longer," growled Kane, edging back along the ledge so that the face of the cliff was close behind him. Serberys's squat bulk completely blocked the trail before him; black tongue licked smoking jowls. He flexed the cramped pain from his sword arm, but did not yet draw his blade.

"But a vassal plays his lord's game for so long as the master wills," mocked Lord Tloluvin, his cloak billowing about him.

"I'm not your vassal." Kane's fists clenched like rocks.

"But you've served me well in the past." The night winds moaned along the escarpment, but his cloak did not swirl in obedience to the wind's caress.

"And you've served me better—and we've fought side by side. But Kane owes allegiance to neither god nor demon, and I'll not be your pawn in this game you play now."

"If not pawn, perhaps prize," the Demonlord laughed. "And yet, you must surely understand that all mortals are but pawns."

"Nor am I mortal."

"Perhaps before dawn you'll be proven wrong on both counts."

This may be my last night, but who comes for me will find no pawn!" warned Kane, the fury of his blue eyes as hellish a flame as the Demonlord's own.

Lord Tloluvin studied the death in Kane's stare. "I've cause enough to respect you, Kane, true, and admire you. At times our battles have been in the same cause."

"You show little gratitude for a comrade in arms."

"Kane! You know better!" protested Lord Tloluvin in sardonic reproof. "I only follow my nature—one you well understand."

Sathonys, Tloluvín, Lato, by whatever name—my nature is the same. Only a fool expects loyalty in the Demonlord's friendship."

"Perhaps then you, too, are only a pawn—to your nature, or whatever laws you obey."

The Demonlord's smile was suddenly menacing. Serberys growled like brazen thunder and took half a stride forward on the ledge, "Your wit is as bold as your arrogance, Kane. We'll argue this later, I think.

"But stop to consider my game, since I doubt its nature confuses you. You must admit I've set the gameboard well. For seven years Ionor's festering hate has poisoned this wounded land—twisted her soul and tainted the spirits of those about her. And now to seal her pact of vengeance she will give me the child, the daughter she has tortured herself to keep hating for seven years. Is it not a work of art, Kane? You can admire art such as this, I know. Or do you better appreciate the mastery with which I drew you to me here tonight—held by bonds of fever like a chained sacrifice, with greed and ruthless cruelty like a snarling pack to drive you—and a trail of death and ruin to mark the passage of the hunt."

"If you've set the gameboard for this night, Sathonys," Kane spat back, "you still cannot manipulate all the pieces. Other men you may use as pawns, but not Kane! I'll yield to no predestined fate, and if I fall, I'll die hard and I'll die a free man!"

"Still shaking your bloodstained fist at fate, Kane? But I suppose that is your nature, and I return your accusation. Before dawn comes we'll speak further on free will, and then I think we'll know better whether this arrogance is vain boast or desperate faith."

Serberys raised his sooty muzzle and bayed. The ravenous howl sent echoes of terror resounding through the night.

Lord Tloluvin stroked his massive shoulders. "Yes, Serberys, I sense it, too. Ionor approaches Raven's Bald with the child, and we must go await her."

His smile was agelessly cruel. "By your leave, Kane—but while we've tarried here, the seeds sown seven years ago in hate, and so carefully nurtured since, are about to flower beneath my moon.

"And did you know that this trail you've so desperately followed ends in a sheer precipice only a short way from here?"

Thunder smashed down over the ledge, like deafening laughter.

Kane stood alone.

X

Demonlord's Moon

At first Kane hoped that the Demonlord had lied. As rage fired new strength through his muscles he plunged recklessly along the now wider trail. For some distance the ledge offered a secure path along the face of the cliff. Kane realized now that he was not on the trail he had thought to follow, but at the same time he was headed in the direction of Raven's Bald. Lord Tloluvin would have known this—had he then lied to make Kane turn back?

The Demonlord had not lied this time.

Kane skidded to a halt, as before him the ledge abruptly fell away. Here the fault in the strata had broken loose, and a great section of the escarpment had sheared off into the River Cotras far below. No trail crossed the black chasm.

Straining to pierce the river mist, Kane peered upward. Above him the cliff marched into the night; below he could hear the muffled roar of River Cotras. From what he remembered of the river gorge in this region, this ledge must be at least a hundred feet from the crest. He was trapped here, unless...

Examining the chasm he thought he discerned a narrow crack which appeared to lead to the area of the fall. If he could find handholds along this crevice, he might be able to reach the slide, where the broken rock might provide an avenue to scale the bluff.

There was, of course, no hope in turning back.

Am I truly a pawn in the Demonlord's game?

The crack in the rock ran perhaps fifty feet—a sheer plummet—before it reached the slide rubble. The stone was damp and slippery, white with frost in places. Bits of splintered rock plugged the crevice every few inches. There scarcely seemed space enough to dig his fingers.

Stretching out, Kane forced his powerful hands into the crevice. He heaved his massive body off the ledge and into space. His giant shoulders bunched and strained; his legs scuffed against the rock, while the river mist swirled up about him from far below.

His movements were rapid, for he knew his overtaxed strength would falter in another moment. Like a great ape, he swung across the escarpment, driving his body on by force of will. Death

awaited his first misjudged grip.

The crevice slowly narrowed. Kane found he must support his weight solely by his clawing fingers—and still the crack tightened. Until there was no longer space to thrust his fingers.

Kane's breath grunted an inarticulate curse, but with each second a killing agony, he wasted no time. Hanging perilously by one arm, Kane quickly drew a dagger from his boot. Its flat balanced blade was designed for throwing; whether its steel would support his bulk, Kane had only one way of determining. Using the knife for a piton, Kane jammed it into the crevice and tried his weight.

The tempered steel shivered and grated; the hilt seemed to bend slightly under the tearing stress. But it held. Clinging desperately to the sweaty hilt, Kane jerked its mate from his other boot. He thrust it into the crevice, then swung out with the other blade. Two insignificant hafts of steel and leather were all that supported him above the deadly abyss. It seemed the blades could never endure the strain. They did; Kane's desperate gamble succeeded.

With these makeshift pitons, he struggled across the final few yards to what was relative safety. Reaching the rubble left by the avalanche, he gratefully rested his boots on an outjutting boulder. An hour's rest would seem life saving now, but he knew there was not a minute to spare. Grimly he began to scale the chaos of broken rock which marked the slide.

Stundorn was ill at ease. The blocky mercenary distrusted the strange swirling mist that cloaked, then revealed the autumnal ridges. Nor did he like the eerie shadows that seemed to flash along in the darkness on all sides of them, although time and again a sudden frightened challenge had revealed nothing. *But would shadows make sounds?*

Once more he tried to fight down gnawing fear. He had lost hope of finding Kane in the night—already they had hunted farther than Pleddis had been prepared to. Pleddis had overstretched their lines, spread the search too far. Now they wandered through the darkness in small bands. Stundorn glanced ahead on the ridge as the Demonlord's Moon rose high over Raven's Knob. Dread chilled his spirit. This trail skirting the river gorge was no place to linger tonight.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" he demanded of Nattios.

The mountaineer's nerves were, if anything, worse. "There's the tracks. Look at them yourself, and tell me what we're doing. Woman and a child, and not too far ahead. I'll kiss your ass if it's not the woman from the inn and her kid."

"But why would she be on the trail to Raven's Knob?" the other persisted. "No sane errand would take her there tonight of all nights. Hell, you know the stories they tell."

"I didn't say she was going *to* Raven's Knob," Nattios argued. "I said this trail leads past Raven's Knob. We don't know where she's really headed."

"Then why don't we turn back?" grumbled one of the other half-dozen men in their party "Damn woman wants to take her kid and risk what's out here tonight, that's her business."

"None of that talk," growled Stundorn, thinking the man had a valid point. But no he would have to face Pleddis, and his captain took a harsh view of cowardice.

"Ionor's out here she's got to have a good reason," he explained. "Could be she's gone to meet Kane. That kid's got hair like Kane, and those blue eyes. Didn't get them from her mother, and we don't know who she calls father. Might be it's Kane—he's been through this range of hills before."

"Seemed ready enough to drink his blood back at the inn," the grumbler persisted.

"Could have been fake," guessed Stundorn. "Kane decided to hole up at Raven's Eyrie after all—and she was fixing them food. Could be Kane's more welcome there than anyone guessed. Might explain how he managed to slip out of the inn without our knowing it."

"Well, there's something sure funny about that inn," Nattios contributed. Talk drowned out the night's eerie sounds. He hoped the conversation would continue.

They shuffled on a bit farther in silence. The movement from the corner of their eyes seemed to increase; the night sounds edged closer at hand. Bolder.

"How close are we to Raven's Knob?" Stundorn asked, uneasily gazing at the bald spur of rock on the crest of the ridge.

"Pretty close—maybe a mile or so by trail," the tracker hazarded. "Stundorn, you suppose Kane knows you shot him?"

"That ain't certain," protested the man with the arbalest, who had earlier boasted of it.

"Because maybe Kane's dead after all. We ain't none of us seen him since the first. There's some damn weird things you hear about Kane, and if he died tonight... Well, there's been dead men before that didn't lie in their graves."

"Shut up!" Stundorn cursed him, thinking that a dead man would surely take vengeance on his slayer if he could return from the grave.

"I just wondered if you knew for sure you shot him, and if you knew where the quarrel hit him, that's all. Then maybe we'd know whether Kane's just crippled, or whether up ahead somewhere there's a dead man waiting..."

"I said, shut up! Keep your mind on the trail."

"Ain't nothing there to keep my mind on. A blind man could read these tracks—they're leading straight along the trail to Raven's Knob."

"Vaul! What's that?" someone gasped.

They froze in their stances to listen. A scraping, scrambling sound not far away...

"It's something climbing up from the river!" another cried out.

"Fool! That's a sheer drop!" Nattios swore.

"It's closer!"

"Then what...?"

With a bloodcurdling howl, Kane flung himself over the last shelf of rock. A man screamed in terror.

Kane's face was battered, his body and clothing torn filthy, stained with blood. His sword flashed from the scabbard as he cleared the precipice, a yell of animal ferocity twisting his lips. He had sprung out of the abyss as if by sorcery—a vengeful phantom who loomed to giant stature in the terror of that moment. The Demonlord's Moon cast its red glare upon him, and his killer's eyes blazed with the sure promise of death.

Stundorn's shot was wild, for only fear had triggered his weapon. "Kane!" someone bawled in panic. The bounty hunters broke and fled.

With a roar of insane fury, Kane lunged after them. With no thought of danger, he drove them before him. Too long had he been hounded by jackals; the wounded lion had turned to kill.

Stundorn wasted an instant trying to crank the cocking ratchet of his arbalest. The reflex was fatal now, for his comrades had

left him to stand alone. As he dropped the useless weapon and groped for his sword, Kane's hell-driven blade split him almost in half. The others made no attempt to stand before his rush. In frantic haste to escape the bellowing demon, Nattios misjudged the edge of the cliff; his screams were swallowed in the river mists.

Kane ravened after them. Another mercenary died with Kane's sword sunk to the hilt through his spine. The survivors split from the trail to plunge into the forest, and Kane leaped after them to tackle the last man. Brutally he pounded the mercenary's skull against the rocks, again and again, until his fists held only pulp.

Then the red mists of rage parted, and Kane rose from his gory work. From the black trees he heard another man scream once and break off. Under the dark pines, shadows rustled to close on the echo of death. Kane coughed and shook his head. As the killing rage left him, awareness of his danger returned.

Had Pleddis heard the cries, the fury of Kane's attack? Had someone escaped to warn him of Kane's presence? The problems seemed only of minor importance; Kane knew a far deadlier menace was closing about him. He stared defiantly at the ridge before him.

There before the red moon rose Raven's Knob. And this trail climbed toward it. Ahead was Ionor with the child—*but how far ahead?*

Kane paused only to snatch up and recock Stundorn's arbalest—for the steel-bowed weapon was accurate to kill at over one hundred fifty yards, and he might still get close enough...

Throwing his last strength into his stride, Kane pounded up the trail to Raven's Knob. His sense of hideous danger all but drowned the agony that shrieked through his frame with every step.

Klesst suddenly stopped and tugged at Ionor's cloak. "Mother, let's not walk any farther. I'm tired now."

"Come on, Klesst. It isn't much farther. If you don't stop this whining, I'll slap you."

Mother's slaps stung all the worse because the girl sensed the anger in her blow. "But Mother, I'm frightened out here. The soldiers are way behind us."

"I said, come on!" Ionor jerked her arm forward, then released her hand once Klesst started to follow. She had always tried to keep from touching her... It was better that way.

"Mother, I think I remember this place."

"Surely you've played near here often before."

"Never. The other children are afraid to come here, and I don't like to be alone so far in the woods."

Ionor walked resolutely on, impatiently slackening her quick stride to let the child stay beside her. It was not as if Klesst were hers. She was Kane's—and a stolen part of her own flesh. Stolen. Raped and shamed and stolen. Klesst wasn't her daughter—she had been determined on that from the first. She was a cancer which Kane had implanted within her body, and in pain she had been purged of the cancer. Almost. The child was something apart from her. If there had ever been love this would be different, but there had never been love; there never would be love. She would feel no more guilt for Klesst than for a cancer that a surgeon excised and destroyed.

It would be over in another few minutes. Seven years of hate. Klesst would not suffer. Not like she had...

"Mother, I think this is the place in my dream."

"Hush, Klesst."

"No, Mother! I know it's the same place. That great big rock up there is where the black dog first appears, and the black man who walks behind him." Klesst's voice rose in sharp fear.

Ionor frowned at the girl. She had hoped to avoid physical contact—*physical force*—with the child, though she had a length of cord under her cloak if she needed it "Don't be afraid, Klesst. When you get to that big rock and see that there's no black hound and his master, then you won't have those silly nightmares any more."

"I'm still scared," Klesst whispered, her eyes round and frightened.

"Come on, quickly now."

Klesst walked slowly on. She did not want to anger Mother. She used to think that if she never made Mother angry again, then Mother might forget the awful thing she once had done—although what this crime might have been, she never understood. Of late Klesst had lost hope of making Mother ever forget.

Then her owl-like eyes stared at the barren spur of rock. Ionor had forgotten—if she ever knew—how well Klesst could see in the dark.

"Mother!" screamed Klesst, breaking away. "I can see them! It's the black dog and the black man! They're waiting in the shadow of those big rocks up ahead! Mother! The black dog sees me, too! Can't you see how red his eyes glow?"

"Come here, damn you!" shouted Ionor, reaching for the cord. In her urgent need to catch the terrified girl, she lunged and stumbled over a root. "Come here!" she yelled, as she sprawled after the retreating child.

It was the last fragment of horror for Klesst. She whirled and

dashed back down the trail, utter panic lending horrible impetus to her childish stride.

Ionor called once more, then saved her breath for overtaking Klesst. The girl could not stay ahead of her for very long.

But terror gave her strength, so that Klesst flew headlong down the path, running faster than she ever had. She could hear Ionor's boots drawing closer from behind, and in her mind Mother, the black hound, and its master all merged into one onrushing phantom of dread.

A giant, diseased apple tree overhung the trail. The last of a blighted orchard that once had stood along this slope, the huge tree reached over the path with grotesque and nightmarish limbs. The sick-sweet odor of rotting apples hung under its shadow like the smell of state flowers in a graveyard. It had frightened Klesst when first they passed beneath its clutching branches.

Now as she rushed past it, her feet skidded on the rotted fruit. Klesst howled and pitched flying onto the decay-strewn ground. The jar of her fall left her no breath to cry out.

Desperately she tried to scramble back up to run. Too late. A frenzy of motion in the darkness, and Ionor's cold hand knotted in her disordered hair. Still trying to draw breath, Klesst was yanked to her feet.

Ionor slapped her, hard. "Now I'll show you what good it is to run!" she panted. And she drew the girl's wrists together, fumbled with the cord.

Klesst watched mutely as her hands were tied, still too terrified to grasp what was happening to her. She wondered if Mother meant to whip her like once she did Sele.

There was a scuff of boot on stone, then another silhouette joined the apple tree's contorted shadow.

It's the black man, thought Klesst. He's come with his hound. Mother will give me to him...

"Kane!" snarled Ionor, leaping up in fury.

There was fury in Kane's eyes.

The arbalest in his arms shuddered.

Ionor shrieked in clawing agony as the iron-barbed quarrel tore into her belly and flung her back against the tree. She should have fallen then; instead she hung there, writhing in torment. At point-blank range the quarrel had drilled through her spine and sunk into the gnarled trunk.

She struggled frantically to break free, but her strength suddenly failed. Hate was slower to desert her, and she spat curses through her bubbling lips as she died. And finally there was an end even to her hate. Her slumped figure hung limply from the apple tree, impaled on the spike like a shrike's prey on a thorn.

Clumsily—for his chest pounded with agony, and scarlet mists blurred his vision—Kane gathered up his sobbing child and wrapped her in his wolfskin cloak. "Well played. Kane!" came sardonic congratulations. "I had thought the game won."

Klesst buried her face in Kane's shoulder. Kane warily shifted his burden away from swordhilt. The Demonlord and his hound stood before him on the trail.

"Do you still say I'm your pawn?" he growled. "There stands your pawn. Your pact is forfeit, and you'll have to play at my game if you think to claim this prize!"

"Your game, Kane?" mocked Sathonys. "I think not. And perhaps I was wrong to call you a pawn. We'll play the game another day, and then we'll see whether Kane is truly master of his fate, or simply fool of luck.

"Still, I won't say this outcome displeases me. Our souls are like matched blades fired in the same forge, Kane. After all these centuries, I believe I'd miss you, and you've served me well so many times."

Kane's eyes blazed in anger.

"As an ally, of course," the Demonlord amended, with a sarcastic salute.

He touched the hound's misshapened head. "Come, Serberys. The moon is growing old, and our friend Kane has led so many souls into our domain tonight. We must not delay our hunt any longer, as I see my creatures have become quite hungry."

Serberys opened his slaving jaws in a baying note of horror.

Hound and master vanished into the night.

Kane almost found pity for those who had dared to pursue him beneath the Demonlord's Moon. But pity was too rare in Kane to bestow upon his enemies.

Through the throbbing haze of pain, Weed felt himself lowered to the floor. He waited blindly for the torture to take some new direction, only thankful that the agony of his wrenched shoulders had let up. Then a knife sheared through his bonds.

He opened his swollen eyes. It was Kane, although it took a moment to be sure. The outlaw leader was a grisly sight to see this side of Hell.

Kane pushed a bottle of brandy into his mouth. Weed tried to take it in his hands but found them too numb to respond. The brandy was fire on his torn lips and broken teeth, but he swallowed greedily as Kane tipped the flask.

In a moment he had come to himself enough to note the torn bodies of his guards strewn about the room. Kane had descended

on them in a murderous rush of fury, but Weed had hung unconscious through it all.

"Can you ride?" Kane demanded.

Weed glanced at Kane's face, then quickly looked away. "I guess so," he grunted, feeling cracked ribs as he struggled to stand. "I guess so. Give me a minute to get my breath."

"There're horses saddled and ready in the stable," Kane told him. "The guards won't bother you."

"Thoem! What's happened?" muttered Weed, swaying for balance. "Where's Pleddis and all his men? They all went out to look for you..."

A chilling howl stirred the night winds. It sounded like the bay of a hound as he closes on his quarry. It was not pleasant to hear.

"I think they found other hunters already out there," said Kane.

He thrust a bulging srip into Weed's hands. It was heavy, but the weight of gold was one that Weed's tingling fingers found strength to close upon. "Here's gold," Kane told him. "Use it as you need it. When you're strong enough to ride, take Klesst here and go. Dawn will soon break, and you'll be safe enough—besides, Sathonys owes me for a game. Take Klesst with you to Obay's Station—that's well north of the Combine's authority, and no one will follow. Take good care of the girl, and when I join you shortly, I'll share my cache with you. I know that interests you."

Weed wiped the blood from his face, not realizing until later that Kane had known his designs. "Sure, Kane. Whatever you say. But what about you? Pleddis is going to return any minute now..."

"I'll see to my end," Kane grimly vowed. "You make damn

certain about yours."

Dawn was greying the skies, the Demonlord's Moon had plunged beneath the black ridges, when Pleddis pushed open the door of Raven's Eyrie. He staggered into a common room, his garments ragged and bloody, his face more colorless than ever. His limbs trembled, and there was gore on his sword no human veins had spilled. He lost his laugh.

"Demons!" he blurted out with a choked voice. In a dazed stupor, he lurched across the center of the room. "Devils from the hills! Vaul! The things were everywhere! Snapping, clawing, leaping out on you from the trees and the shadows and the rocks! Too many—reaching out from all around us! Couldn't make a stand!"

His eyes still shone with horror. "And that hound! That hideous black hound! I saw it drag Eriall down as he ran! Vaul! I can still hear its baying! Drove me like a hunted fox across the ridges—but I outran it, made it back alive!"

He paused for breath, and awareness of his surroundings came to him. The huge inn lay in total silence.

"Where—where is everyone?" Pleddis called out.

"I'm right here," said Kane, rising out of the shadow.