

Sing A Last Song Of Valdese
Karl Edward Wagner

I
The Girl Beneath the Oak

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

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

"You ride fast this evening reverence."

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

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

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

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

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

"The old inn has lately been reopened."

"That may be. But my path lies to Carrasahl."

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

"Climb up and I'll take you to the inn on the Carrasahl road."

"But my path lies to Rader."

The priest shrugged thick shoulders beneath his cassock. "Then you'd best be going."

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

Shadows were lengthening, merging into dusk along the foot of the ridges. The declining sun shed only a dusty rubrous haze across the hilltops, highlighting tall hardwoods already fired by autumn's touch. Streaked with mist, the valleys beyond were swallowed in twilight.

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

His horse stamped impatiently.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The lure of wanton flesh is nothing to a priest of Thoem," he intoned, "Then bugger yourself!" she spat, and lunged with a shrill scream for his horse's face. Sharp claws raked blood across his nose.

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

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

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

II

The Inn by the Side of the Road

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

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

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

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

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

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

A narrow, beardless face frowned out at him from the half-open doorway.

"Who... what do you want... reverence?" His voice was thin and nervous, and he spoke in half-whisper.

"Food and lodging," the priest tumbled impatiently. "This is an inn, I believe."

"I'm sorry. There's no more room. You'll have to go elsewhere." He made to close the door.

The priest's huge fist checked him. "Are you a fool? Where is the innkeeper?" he demanded, suspicious at the man's show of anxious confusion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A short, stocky gentleman with a fine grey beard looked gravely at the

priests. He straightened from the fire where he had stooped to light his pipe. A silver medallion embossed with a university seal depended from a chain about his thick neck.

"Precedent?" the abbot snapped.

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

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

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

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

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

"So it's true that you plan to supplement Nentali's Interpretation of Elder Glyphics?" suggested the grey-cowled priest.

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

"Oh, please, learned gentlemen," mimicked a sneering voice from the corner.

"Don't bore us all to death with such learned discussions."

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

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

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

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

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

Claesna indicated the two men in the near corner. One was a tall, lantern-jawed swordsman with iron-grey hair who wore the green tunic of a ranger. The other, his prisoner, was a wiry man with pinched face and stained yellow beard, whose blue eyes seemed startlingly innocent for one weighed down with wrist and leg irons.

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

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

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

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

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

"Pray Thoen, make her stop!" he moaned.

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

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

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

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

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

"Please, Jarcos!" his brother begged. "Don't offend these revered sirs!"

Hef giggled. "Don't eat it all now! Save a nice hefty bone for poor toothless Hef!"

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

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

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

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

III

"Do You Know the Song of Valdese?"

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

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

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

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

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

"The mountains of Halbrosn seem haunted with all manner of inhuman fiends," Dordron remarked with a shiver. "Jarcos, why did you insist we make this journey to Rader? You know the wool market there has been dead for years." "My astrologer agreed this was a wise venture. Let me worry about our business, little brother." Jarcos contrived to shape his rolls of chins into a resolute expression.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So are many others."

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

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

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

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

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

"Valdese?"

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

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

The innkeeper sensed the unease of his guests. "Had you not heard that legend, gentlemen? But I forget--you're strangers here, all of you. Still I thought you must have heard her song. Do you know the Song of Valdese?" He raised a black-gloved hand. "Come out, Bodger. Sing Valdese's song for our guests." The dwarf scuttled out of the shadow with his mandolin. Bowing to his audience, he began to sing, his voice comic no longer.

In the dark hills of Halbros' land,
There dwelled a lovely maid--
The brightest flower, the rarest jewel,
Shone dull in Valdese's hand.

Her father's inn stood beside the road,
Great was his wealth of gold--
But the choicest treasure of the land,
Was the heart of fair Valdese.

Then came brash suitors to her door,
Six bright and bold young men--
Said they had come to win the hand,
Of the maiden called Valdese.

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

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

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

"Oh no," swore the suitors in jealousy,
"You'll not steal our prize"--
And with cruel knives they took his life,
And the heart of Valdese after.

Now Valdese lies in the cold, cold ground,
And her spirit haunts these hills--
But her lover was sworn in the Grey Lord's name,
To serve seven times seven years.

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

"Perhaps the last verse hasn't been written," the innkeeper suggested.

"Bodger, see how things are upstairs. It's grown strangely quiet up there."

"Well, at least we servants of Thoem have nothing to fear from lamiae!"

muttered the abbot stoutly. "Do we not, Revered Callistratis?"

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

Passlo suddenly drew a crystal-hilted dagger from the folds of his cassock.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Indeed?" Dordron's voice was strained.

"In fact, at this very inn."

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

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

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

"Valdese and Korjonos were childhood lovers. She was the daughter of one of the richest men in Halbrosn, while he was the son of a servant at his inn.

They were both barely past ten when Korjonos was orphaned. Penniless, he left the inn to study at a hidden school and vowed to return for her in seven years, with the wealth and power that his wisdom would bring him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

" 'He'll not curse us,' said one, and they cut out his tongue.

" 'He'll not cast spells against us,' said another; and they cut off his hands.

" 'Nor seek to follow after us,' and they cut off his feet.

"Then they cut away his manhood and told her, 'He's not fit to lie with.'

"And they cut away his face and told her, 'He's not fit to look at.'

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

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

"Korjonos?" asked the priest

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Korjonos chanted and gestured. "Holy man, evil man. Wise man, fool. Brave man, coward. Six corners of the heptagon, and I, a dead man who lives, make the

seventh. Contradicting opposites that invoke the chaos lords--and the final paradox is the focus of the spell: an innocent soul who has never lived, a damned soul who can never die!

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

Suddenly Ranvyas sprang to life. "The dagger!"

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

Hissing in rage, Korjonos rushed into the incantation.

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

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

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

"Well done, Ranvyas!" Claesna gasped shakily. "You've slain his familiar, and the spell is shattered!"

He sneered at the wizard. "Unless, of course, you've another 'damned soul who cannot die' who can complete your incantation."

Korjonos's bowed shoulders signalled his defeat.

"Let's get out of here!" blubbered Jarcos. His brother was weeping mindlessly.

"Not until we slay the wizard," growled Ranvyas.

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

"Thoem! It's cold!" chattered Passlo. "And what's wrong with the light in here?"

The priest broke into their circle and bent over the pile of seared clothing.

They thought he meant to retrieve the enchanted dagger, but when he straightened he held the stillborn child in his left hand.

His cowl fell back. They saw his red hair.

They saw his eyes.

"Kane!" screamed Claesna.

Korjonos shouted out syllables that formed another name.

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

At the doorway behind them the bolt snapped with rust; boards rotted and sagged, crumbled into powdery dissolution. They stared in dread understanding.

On the threshold stood a tall figure in a tattered cloak of grey.

Kane turned his face.

And the Grey Lord lifted his mask.

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

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

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

The mist crawled in wild patterns across the stars. And Kane saw a wraithlike figure of grey, his cloak flapping in the night winds. Behind him seemed to follow seven more wraiths, dragging their feet as if they would not follow. Then another phantom. A girl in a long dress, racing after. She caught the seventh follower by the hand. Strained, then drew him away. The Grey Lord and those who must follow vanished into the night skies. The girl and her lover fell back in an embrace--then melted as one into the mist.

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