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Two Suns Setting

Karl Edward Wagner

I

Alone with the Night Winds

Sullen red disk, the sun was burying itself beneath a monotonous horizon of rolling gravel waste that stretched behind him miles uncounted—and possibly untrod save by his horse's hooves. Long before the sunlight failed, its warmth was snuffed out in the empty lifelessness of the desert, so that in its last hour the sun shone cheerless as the rising moon. Crimson as it climbed, the full moon seemed a false dawn to mock the dying sun, arriving prematurely, disrespectful as a greedy heir pacing in eager impatience before the master's deathbed. For a space the limitless skies of twilight displayed two rubrous globes low on either horizon, so that Kane mused as to whether his long journey across the desert might not have led him to some strange dusk world where two ancient suns smouldered in the heavens. The region seemed unearthly in its chill desolation, and certainly an aura of unguessable antiquity hung as a grey shadow over each tumbled bit of stone.

Kane had left Carsultyal with no particular destination or goal other than to ride far beyond that city's influence. There were those who said that Kane was driven from Carsultyal, his power there broken at last by fellow sorcerers jealous of his long-held prestige—and alarmed by the bizarrely alien direction his studies had taken in recent years. Kane himself considered his departure more or less voluntary, albeit precipitous, arguing privately that had he really wanted to, he could have fended off the attack of his former colleagues—even though he owed allegiance to neither god nor demon from whom he might have sought intercession. Rather, mankind's first great city had grown stagnant over the last century. The spirit of discovery, of renaissance that had drawn him to Carsultyal in its earliest years was burned out now, so that boredom, his nemesis, had overtaken Kane once more. To be sure, he had been restless, his thoughts drawn more and more to the world beyond Carsultyal—lands yet to know the presence of man. But that he returned to his pathless wandering without much forethought could be judged in that Kane had left the city with little more than a few supplies, a double handful of gold coins, a fast horse, and a sword of tempered Carsultyal steel. Those who sought to seize his relinquished power may have regretted their inheritance, but this minor vindication seemed pointless now.

With dusk, the wind began to rise, a whining chill breath from the mountains whose rusted peaks still burned with the final rays of the sun, now vanished beneath the opposite horizon. Kane shivered and drew his russet cloak closer about his massive shoulders, regretting the warm furs that scavengers now snarled over in Carsultyal. The Herratlonai was a cold, empty waste, where nights dropped to freezing. With the mountain wind, his outfit of green wool shirt, dark leather vest, and pants was less than adequate for the night.

The previous day he had eaten the last hoarded chips of dried fruit and jerky, after short rations for a week or more. Of water luckily there was yet half a bag; he had filled the skins to bursting before entering the desert, and a waterhole had providentially appeared along the ghost of a trail he followed. Or thought he followed. The gravel waste southeast of Carsultyal's domains was reputed to border on one of the prehuman realms of lost antiquity. There were tales of cities impossibly ancient buried beneath the gravel dunes. Kane had come upon what he hoped might be traces of a forgotten path across the desert to the fabled mountains of the eastern continent. He determined to follow this, and at times he discovered sentinel boulders whose all but effaced hieroglyphs might resemble those glimpsed in books of elder world lore—or might be the deluding artistry of wind and ice. Beyond this tantalization, Kane found nothing further to disrupt the monotonous desolation but stray patches of sparse scrub and gorgeous columns of agatized wood. The grass his mount cropped; for himself Kane had not seen even a lizard in days. Perhaps it had been rash to attempt traverse of a desert whose limits no man had knowledge of, at least without a packtrain of provisions. But Kane had not embarked under the brightest of circumstances, nor had the years dulled his reckless whim. Philosophically he congratulated himself on riding a course no enemy would care to follow.

Then the mountains had broken through the thin haze of the eastern horizon like a row of worn and discolored teeth. Their presence gave some cause for optimism—at least he was across the desert—but this hope was clouded when the late afternoon sun revealed the hills to be merely a more vertical variation on the present terrain. Dry slopes of gravel and crumbling bluffs appeared lifeless except for dark blotches of twisted underbrush. From the talus gleamed iridescent flashes of sunlight, colored then flung back by mammoth slabs of petrified wood, strewn about like a giant's plundered jewel hoard.

But with darkness had also come the startling smell of wood smoke in the mountain wind—a familiar scent uncanny in this stark desolation. Kane brushed smooth the grimy beard that hung like rust over coarse features, thumbed a few blowing strands of red hair back beneath a leather headband sewn with plaques of lapis lazuli, and sniffed the night wind in disbelief. His mount paced onward, the night deepened, and against the foot of the mountains ahead beckoned the light of a campfire. No, simply the light of a fire, he mused—there was no reason to be more specific. At this distance it must be a good-sized blaze.

He guided his horse closer, picking his way carefully over the gravel in the moonlight. With a twisting ache in his belly, Kane recognized the odor of roasting meat within the smoke, and there was no longer any doubt. Calculatingly he studied the still distant campfire. He had seen no evidence of habitation against the slope, and in this emptiness such would seem an impossibility. Not that it seemed any more probable, but indications were that he had chanced upon some other wanderer. As to who or what might be camped beside the ridge, or what circumstances had brought about his presence, Kane was at loss to conjecture. Nothing was known of those who might dwell beyond the settled northwestern crescent of the Great Southern Continent, and in the dawn world more races than mankind walked the Earth.

Whoever had built the fire, he ate his meat cooked and so could not be hopelessly alien. From the size of the campfire, Kane guessed it was a small party of nomads or savages—likely someone from whatever lay beyond the mountains. The significant point was the roasting meat. Licking dry lips, Kane unfastened his sword from the saddle and buckled it across his back, so that the familiar hilt protruded reassuringly over his right shoulder. The scabbard tip he left untied, so that it would pivot freely on its shoulder swivel when he grasped the hilt. Cautiously he approached the campfire.

II

Two Who Met by Firelight

His keen nostrils caught an animal smell, sour beneath the pungency of wood smoke and cooked flesh. At first the crackling firelight screened the shape crouched beyond, so that Kane warily nudged his steed toward another angle of vision to confirm his dawning suspicion. His face tightened at recognition. Only one man squatted beside the blaze—;if a giant might be termed "man."

Kane had seen—;had spoken with—;giants in the course of his wanderings, although in recent decades they were seldom encountered. A proudly aloof, taciturn race he knew them to be. Few in number and scornful of mankind's emerging civilization, they lived a semi-barbaric existence in lands unfrequented by man. True, there abounded gruesome tales of individual giants who terrorized isolated human settlements, but these were outlaws to their own race—;or more often the monstrous hybrid ogres.

This particular individual did not appear threatening. While he obviously had heard the clash of shod hooves on stone, his attitude seemed curious rather than hostile as Kane approached. Not that someone his stature need display an aggressive front at the appearance of a single horse and rider. In comfortable reach lay a hooked axe whose bronze head could serve as a ship's anchor. Kane realized that from the other's higher vantage point, his approach had been observed beyond the ring of firelight. Still the giant showed no sinister action. Spitted over sputtering flames turned an entire carcass of what looked to be goat. Hot, succulent meat...

Hanger overpowered caution. Poised to wheel and gallop away at the first sign of danger, Kane boldly rode up to the fringe of firelit circle and halted.

"Good evening," he greeted levelly, speaking the language of the giant's race with complete fluency. "Your campfire was visible at some distance. I wondered if I might join you."

The giant grunted and shielded his eyes with a hand larger than a spade. "Well, what's this here? A human who speaks the Old Tongue. Out of nowhere, too—;and in a land that even ghosts have abandoned. This sort of novelty can't be ignored. Come on into the light, manling. We'll share hospitality of the trail." His voice, though loud as a man's shout, had an even bass timbre.

Kane muttered thanks and dismounted, deciding to gamble on the giant's apparent goodwill. As he stepped before the fire, he and his host exchanged curious inspection. At a bit over six feet and carrying past three hundred pounds of bone, sinew, and muscle, Kane was seldom physically overawed. This night he stood alone in the desert before one who could overpower him as if he were a weakling child.

He estimated the giant's height at somewhere around fifteen feet. It was difficult to tell, since he sat crouched on the ground, knees drawn up, enswathed in a cloak of bearskins like a misshapen hairy tent. Disregarding the matter of size, the giant's appearance was human enough—;his proportions were those of a man in his prime, though he seemed somewhat lanky from a slightly disproportionate length of limb. Broadly muscled, his weight must be enormous. He wore rough boots the size of panniers, and under the cloak a crudely stitched tunic and leggings of bide. Calves and arms were matted with coarse bristles. Perhaps too bony to be called craggy, his features were not displeasing; his beard was shaggy, brown hair drawn back in a short braid at the nape. Brown also were his eyes, set wide beneath an intelligent brow.

Looking him over as a man might size up a stray dog, the giant glanced at Kane's face and gave an interested grunt. He gazed thoughtfully into Kane's cold blue eyes for a moment—;something few

cared to do. "You're Kane, aren't you?" he commented.

Kane started, then smiled bitterly. "A thousand miles from the cities of man, and a giant calls me by name."

The giant seemed amused. "Oh, you'll have to wander far if you really seek anonymity. We giants have watched the frantic history of your race. We recall when mankind aborted from its womb, pretending to be adult instead of misbegotten fetus. To man these few centuries are time immemorial; to our race a nostalgic yesterday. We remember well the Curse of Kane and still recognize his mark."

"That history is already garbled and distorted," Kane murmured, eyes for a moment focused beyond. "Kane is becoming misty legend in the old homes of man—and lost in obscurity in the new lands. Already I've travelled through lands where men did not know me for who I am."

"And you kept wandering, too—because they soon learned to dread the name of Kane," concluded the giant. "Well, Kane, my name is Dwassllir, and I'm pleased to find a legend joining me at my lonely fire."

Kane shrugged an ironic acknowledgment. "What's that roasting in your lonely fire?" He looked hungrily at the grease-dripping carcass.

"A mountain goat I dropped this afternoon—good game is scarce around here, I've found. Hey, give that spit a nudge, will you?"

Kane heaved the spit to the rarest side. "You going to eat all of it?" he asked bluntly, too hungry for pride.

Dwassllir might well have done otherwise, but the giant seemed glad for the companionship and tore off a generous side of ribs that taxed even Kane's voracity. Again the image of stray dog occurred to Kane, but the growling in his belly claimed first place in his thoughts. The goat was tough, stringy, half raw and gamy in taste; it was ecstasy to devour. One eye still watching the giant warily, he gnawed on the ribs with gusto, washing down the greasy flesh with mouthfuls of stale water from Dwassllir's canteen.

With a belch that fanned the flames, Dwassllir stood and stretched, licked his fingers, wiped face with hands, then scrubbed his hands with loose gravel. When the giant was erect, Kane realized that his height was closer to eighteen feet. Leisurely Dwassllir picked over the remains of the goat. "Want any more?" he inquired. Kane shook his head, still struggling with the ribs. A short tug wrenched loose the remaining hind leg, and the giant settled back with a contented sigh to gnaw the joint.

"Game is hard to run across in this range," he reflected, gesturing with the tattered femur. "Doubt if you'd find anything in that stretch of desert yonder. Likely that horse will be the only meat you'll find until you get into the plains east of here."

"I thought about eating him," Kane conceded. "But on foot I'd stand little chance of crossing this waste."

Dwassllir snorted disparagingly. Because of their enormous size, giants looked upon a horse as only another game animal. "The frailty of your race! Strip man of his crutches, and he's helpless to stand against his world."

"Don't oversimplify," Kane objected. "Mankind will be master of this world. In only a few centuries I've seen our civilization grow from a sterile paradise, from scattered barbaric tribes to a vast and expanding empire of cities, villages, and farms. Ours is the fastest rising civilization ever to burst upon this world."

"Only because man has stolen his civilization from the ruins of better races who preceded him. Human

civilization is parasitic—a gaudy fungus that owes its vitality to the dead genius upon whose corpse it flourishes!"

"Wiser races, I'll grant you," Kane pointed out. "But it is mankind who has survived, not Earth's elder races. It is a measure of man's resourcefulness that he can salvage from prehuman civilizations knowledge that is invaluable to the advance of his own race. Carsulyal has risen thus from a fishing village to the greatest city in the known world. Her rediscovered knowledge has shaped the emergence of mankind to our present civilization."

Dwassllir snapped the femur explosively and sucked at its marrow. "Civilization! You boast that as man's major accomplishment! It is nothing—only an outgrowth of human weakness! Man is too frail, too unworthy a creature to live within his environment. He must instead prop himself up with his civilization, his learning. My race learned to live in the real world, to merge with our environment. We need no civilization. Man is a cripple who flaunts his infirmity, boasts of his crutches. You retreat into the walls of your civilization because you are too weak to stand before nature as part of the natural environment. Instead of living as partner to nature, man hides behind his civilization, curses and defies true life, distorts his environment to accommodate his own failings. Beware that your environment does not strike back from all your blasphemies, for that day mankind shall be snuffed out like the unnatural freak man is!

"Even you, Kane, you who are reviled as the most dangerous man of your race. Without your horse, your clothes, your weapons, could you have crossed that desert alive as you have just barely done? One of my race could!

"My race is older than yours. We had grown to maturity while a mad god was playing his idiot game of shaping mankind from the bestial filth that skulked where shadow lay deepest. Had man walked the Earth of my race's youth, his civilization would have protected him no better than an eggshell. That Earth was more feral than this world man knows. My ancestors defied storms, glaciers, catastrophes that would have swept away your cities like dry leaves before the wind! They stood naked before beasts more savage than any man has known—grappled and conquered the sabretooth, the great sloth, the cave bear, the woolly mammoth, and other creatures whose strength and ferocity are unknown in this tame age! Could man have survived in that heroic age? I doubt that all his cunning and trickery could have saved him!"

"Perhaps not, but then your race has considerable physical advantage," argued Kane wondering how wise it might be to provoke the other. "If my stride were as long as yours, then I wouldn't need a horse to cross a desert—although I think your disdain might not exist, if there were a steed great enough for a giant to straddle. Nor would I need my sword if I were huge enough to crush a lion as if it were only a jackal. Your boast is founded on the fact that your size makes you physically superior to the dangers of your environment, which is a boast that any large and powerful animal could echo. Who is braver—one of your ancestors who barehanded throttled a cave bear close to him in size, or a man with a spear who kills a tiger many times his superior in physical power?"

He paused, waiting to see if the giant had taken offense. However, Dwassllir was not of volatile temper. Belly full and feet warm, he was in a pleasant mood for fireside debate with his diminutive companion.

"True, yours is an older race, and mankind an arrogant youth," Kane continued. "But what are the accomplishments of your race? If you scorn to build cities, to sail ships, to settle the wilderness, to master the secrets of prehuman knowledge, then what have you achieved? Art, poetry, philosophy, spiritualism—are these fields your race has mastered?"

"Our achievement has been to live at peace with our environment—to live as a part of the natural world, instead of waging war with nature," declared Dwassllir steadily.

"All right then, I'll accept that," Kane persisted. "Perhaps you have found fulfillment in your rather primitive life style. However, the measure of a race's attainments must finally be its ability to flourish within its chosen role. If your race has done this so well, why then do your numbers diminish, while mankind spreads over the Earth? Never has your race been a populous one, and today man encounters giants only rarely. Will your race then fade away with the passing years—until one day the giants will be known only in legend along with the fierce creatures your ancestors fought? What then will survive your passing? What will remain to tell of your vanished glory?"

Dwassllir became sadly pensive, so that Kane regretted having pursued the argument. "You humans seem too content to measure achievement in terms of numbers," he answered. "But I can't make full refutation of your logic. Our numbers have been declining for centuries, and I can't really tell you why. Our lives are long—I'm not as much your junior in years as you may suppose, Kane. We are slow to mate and raise children, but this was always so. Our natural enemies have all passed into extinction or retreated to the most obscure reaches. Our simple medicines are sufficient to nurse us through whatever disease or injury might strike us. No, our deaths have not increased.

"I think our race has grown old, tired. Perhaps we should have followed the giant beasts of the savage past into the realm of shadow. At least our old enemies gave life adventure! It is as if my race has lived beyond its era, and now we perish from boredom. We're like one of your kings who has conquered all his enemies and now has only a dull old age to endure.

"My race rose in a heroic age, Kane! It was truly a day of giants in that era! But that age is dead. Gone are the great beasts. Vanished the elder races whose wars rocked the roots of mountains. Earth has been inherited by the insignificant scavenger. Man crawls about the ruins of the great age and proclaims himself to be Earth's new master! Perhaps man will survive to accomplish his insolent usurpation—more likely he will destroy himself in seeking to command mysteries the elder races found too awesome for even their powers to control!

"But when the day comes that man will be master of the Earth, my race will hopefully not be present to endure that humiliation! We are a race of heroes who have outlived the age of heroes! Can you blame us if we tire of existence in this age of boastful pygmies!"

Kane fell silent. "I understand your sentiments," he finally said. "But to abandon yourself to despair, to brood upon vanished glory, doesn't impress me as heroic."

He stopped, not wishing to deepen the shadow of melancholy that had gathered over their thoughts. "May I ask what brings you to this lost wilderness of dead rock?" he asked, thinking to change the subject. "Or do these nameless mountains border on the lands of your people?"

Dwassllir shook himself and tossed an uprooted shrub into the fire. The leaves hissed shrilly, then whipped loose from blackened stems to rise like red stars fading into the night. "What I seek is no secret," he replied, "although it may seem pointless to you as it has to some of my friends.

"Centuries ago, before this region was stripped barren of soil and hence of life, there were villages of my race along these mountains—which are not nameless, but are called the Antamareesi range. Under these hills lie immense caverns, which my ancestors used for shelter in days before they raised houses, then later mined for the veins of metal they discovered within. The climate was warmer, the land was green, game was plentiful—it was a good region to settle and to look upon in that age.

"Those were the great days! Life in that age was an ever challenging struggle between the savagery of the ancient Earth and the unyielding strength of my race! Can you imagine the tremendous energy of those people? They stood chest to chest against a ferociously hostile world, and they conquered whatever

enemy they faced! Their gods were Fire and Ice—the implacable opposites that were the ruling forces of their age! And their enemies were not only the forces of nature, or the great beasts—some of the elder races challenged the ascendancy of my race as well!

"Perhaps it was their sorcery that left this region lifeless and barren. Our legends tell of battles with strange races and stranger weapons in the dawn world, and my ancestors were victorious over these enemies, too. The hero of one legendary battle, King Brotemllain, whose name you may know as the greatest king of my race, ruled over these mountains. His body was laid to rest within one of these caverns, and upon his brow remains the ancestral crown of my people—ancient even then, and given to him after death because of the undying greatness of his rule."

Dwassllir was a fire now, his momentary depression seared away by intense fervour. He considered Kane thoughtfully, made a decision, and spoke earnestly, "I've been searching for Brotemllain's legendary burial place. And from certain signs, I think I'm about to discover it. I mean to recover his crown! King Brotemllain's crown is emblematic of my race's ancient glory. Although our wars and our kings are all past now, I believe that resurrection of this legendary symbol might unlock some of the old energy and vitality of my people. Perhaps the idea brands me a fool and dreamer, as many have scoffed, but I mean to do this thing! Surely this relic from an age of heroes could serve to spark some new flame of glory to my race even in these grey days!

"I wouldn't suggest this to another of your race, Kane, but because you are who you are, I'll offer both an invitation and a challenge. If you'd care to come along with me on this search, Kane, I'd welcome your company. It may be that you will understand my race better if you follow me into the shadow of that age of lost glory."

"Thank you for the invitation—and the challenge," declared Kane solemnly. The venture intrigued him, and the giant seemed to eat well. "I'll be proud to make that journey with you."

III

Dead Giant's Crown

The trees grew less far apart here, though still dwarfed and tortured by the chill breeze. Two days had Kane followed Dwassllir about the crumbling ridges, his horse matching the giant's restless stride. Now on the third day Dwassllir's whoop chorused by a hundred echoes announced the termination of his search.

The discovery seemed unimpressive. They had entered a deep valley and traced a course to its gorgelike bead, where Kane glanced uneasily at the boulder-strewn slopes enclosing them overhead. At times Dwassllir had eagerly pointed out some rounded monument whose carvings the winds of time had all but obliterated. Again he would pause to examine some unprepossessing mound, where the drifting gravel nestled upon blocks of hewn stone and perhaps a shard of ceramic, a smear of charcoal fragments, or a lump of dried wood so ancient that it seemed more lifeless than the stones.

"There stands the entrance to the tomb of King Brotemllain," Dwassllir proclaimed, and he gestured to a rubble-choked patch of darkness that burrowed into the valley wall. The opening had been about twenty-five feet high and half as broad, although several feet were now filled in by debris. Evidence of masonry framed the entrance, along with great chunks of shredded wood, some of whose blackened splinters were conglomerate with verdigris—all that remained of portals at last fallen to time itself.

"I'm certain this is the valley described in our legends," the giant rumbled jubilantly. "The passage leads into a vast system of caverns. It was a natural opening my ancestors enlarged to enter a major side

branch as it passes close to the surface. Beyond these ruins of the ancient monument should lie the domed natural chamber where Brotemllain's corpse was enthroned for the ages."

Kane frowned at the dark opening doubtfully, a whisper of unease drifting through his thoughts. "I wouldn't count on finding much in there but bats and dust. Time and decay generally devour the leavings of less hallowed thieves. Or does this tomb have its unseen guardians? It would seem unusual with so renowned a tenant and so legendary a treasure if this tomb were not guarded by some still vigilant spell."

With a shrug Dwassllir dismissed Kane's foreboding. "Unusual for your race, maybe. But this was a shrine most sacred to my race. Besides, who would dare pilfer the grave of a giant? Come on, we'll take torches and see if King Brotemllain still holds court."

While Kane struck fire, the giant scoured about for a supply of resiniferous wood. He returned with a dead tree as thick as Kane's thigh. Taking several shorn branches, Kane accompanied Dwassllir into the cave, the latter wielding a section of trunk.

Their progress was quickly interrupted, blocking the passage but for a narrow crevice interposed a jumble of broken rock. A segment of the passage wall had collapsed.

Dwassllir examined the barrier thoughtfully. "It's going to take some time to dig through this," he concluded sourly.

"Assuming your efforts didn't bring down the rest of the mountain," was Kane's ominous comment. "There's a fault in the rock here, or this slide would not have broken through. If the caverns run as extensively as you say, there must be flaws undermining this entire range. The centuries have spread the cracks and further weakened the rock, so it's solid as a rotted tooth. It's a wonder these mountains haven't tumbled flat before now."

Jabbing out his torch, the giant craned his neck to peer along the crevice. "Passage opens up again, and just beyond, I think I can make out where it opens into the main cavern." He glowered at the obstruction helplessly for a moment, then gazed down at the man.

"You know, you could squeeze through that crack, Kane," he told him. "You could get past and see what's beyond. If there's nothing to be found, then there's nothing lost. But if this is King Brotemllain's tomb, then you can learn whether his crown still lies within."

Kane considered the crevice, his face noncommittal. "It can be done," he pronounced. Casually, not wishing to show his nerve less steady than the giant's: "I'll go look for your bones on my own, then."

The crack was inches too narrow for one of Kane's massive build, so that his clothing scuffed and flesh scraped as he wriggled through the tightest portion. But the wall had not collapsed in a solid thrust; rather, splintered chunks of stone had broken through in a disordered array, and the occlusion was spread like stubby fingers instead of a compact fist. Then his thrusting torch shone clear of the rubble and Kane edged into an unobstructed passageway. Quickly he rebuckled his scabbard across his back, but the bare blade stayed in his left fist.

A short way beyond he found the cavern. A pair of steps too high for human stride completed the passage's gentle descent. Kane lifted the torch and looked about, his senses strained to catch any hint of danger. There was nothing to detect, but the obscure sense of menace persisted. Waving the brand to fan its light, he was unable to discern the cavern's boundaries, although this chamber seemed to extend for hundreds of feet. Stalactites hung from the ceiling far above, making a monstrous multi-fanged jaw with stalagmite tusks below. "I've just walked down the beast's tongue," mumbled Kane, clambering over the steps. Thin dust sifted over the stone, this cavern was long dead, too.

"What do you see, Kane?" roared Dwassllir from the crevice. High above the curtain of bats stirred fitfully.

Despite his familiarity with the giant's deafening tone, Kane started and nervously glanced toward the distant ceiling. The torch flared in his hand as he crossed the chamber, sword poised for whatever laired within the darkness.

Then he froze, a thrill tingling through his body as he gazed at what waited at the torchlight's perimeter.

"Dwassllir!" he shouted, in his excitement heedless of the booming echoes. "He's here! You've found the tomb! King Brotemllain's here on his throne, and his crown rests on his skull!"

Revealed in the torchlight jutted an immense throne of hewn stone, upon which its skeletal king still reposed in sepulchral majesty. In the cool aridity of the cavern, the lich had outlasted centuries. Tatters of desiccated flesh held the skeleton together in leathery articulation. Bare bone gleamed dully through chinks in the clinging mail of muscle and sinew, shrunken to ironlike texture. Throne arms were yet gripped by fingers like gnarled oak roots, while about the base was gathered a mouldering drift of disintegrating furs. The gaunt skull retained sufficient shreds of flesh to half mask its death's head grin with lines of sternness—forming a grimace suggesting laughter muffled by set lips, The eyes were sunken circles of darkness whose shadowy depths eluded Kane's torch. Not so the orbs that brooded from above the brow.

Red as setting suns in the torchlight, a pair of fist-sized rubies blazed from King Brotemllain's crown. Kane swore softly, impressed by the wealth he witnessed almost as deeply as he stood in awe of its grisly majesty. The circle of gold could belt a dancing girl's waist, and patterned about the two great stones were another ten or more rough-cut gems of walnut size. Ancient treasure from the giant's plutonian-harvested board.

Thinking of the kingdom encircled in the riches of King Brotemllain's crown, Kane bitterly regretted his shout of discovery. Had he reported the cavern empty, there might have been a chance to smuggle the crown past the giant—or return for it later. But now Dwassllir knew of the crown, and Dwassllir waited at the only exit to the tomb. To attempt to find egress through some hypothetical interpassage into the network of caverns said to run under the mountains would be suicidal—slightly less so than to challenge the giant for possession. Kane ruefully studied the treasure. Unless chance presented for stealthy murder...

"Kane!" The giant's bellow concluded his musing. "You all right in there, Kane? Is it really King Brotemllain?"

"Can't be anything else, Dwassllir!" Kane yelled back, echoes garbling his words. "It's just like your legends told! There's a colossal throne of stone in the cavern's center! About twenty feet of mouldy skeleton's sitting on it, and on his skull there's a golden crown with two enormous rubies! Just a minute and I'll climb up and get it for you!"

"No! Leave it there!" Eagerness shook the giant's shout. "I want to see this for myself!" From the barrier sounded groan and rattle of shifting rubble.

"Wait, damn it all!" Kane howled, scrambling back to the passage. "You're going to bring the whole damn mountain down on us! I'll get your crown for you.

"Leave it! This isn't just a treasure hunt! It's more than just recovering Brotemllain's crown!" puffed the giant, straining to roll back a boulder. "I've dreamed for more years than you can guess of standing before King Brotemllain's throne! Of standing where no giant has entered since the heroic age of my

race! Of calling upon his shade for the strength to lead my race back to its lost glory! So I'll stand before King Brotemllain, and I'll lift his crown from his brow with my own hands! And when I return, my people will see and listen and know that the tales of our ancient greatness are history, not myth!

"Now come on and help me widen this crevice, will you? You can clear away this smaller stuff. This cavern's stood for millennia; We can risk another few minutes."

Kane cursed and joined him at the barrier, reflecting that it was useless arguing with a fanatical giant. Grimly he hauled back on a boulder jammed against the inner face of the blockage.

Sudden tearing groan and Dwassllir's gasp of dismay gave him barely enough warning. Kane catapulted backward just as the unbalanced rock slide protested their trespass. Like the irresistible fist of doom, the rock shelf burst from the wall and smashed against the opposite side.

Deafened by the concussion, pelted by splintered fragments, Kane twisted frantically to roll clear. He fell in a bruised huddle past the foot of the steps. For a moment of dazed confusion it seemed that the entire cavern rocked and bucked with a crescendo repercussion of the collapsed passageway.

When the last slamming echo had lost its note, the final chunk of cracked stone bounced past, Katie groggily sat up to lick his wounds. Sore, but no bones broken, a long gash down his left shoulder. His sword arm was numb where a rock splinter had struck, and it would need bandaging to staunch the trickle of blood. Relatively unscathed, he decided, considering he had nearly been crushed deader than King Brotemllain.

His sword was still sheathed, but the torch had been lost as he leaped away, and the chamber was as dark as a tomb could get. Kane did not need a torch to learn the worst; the absence of any ray of light told him that. King Brotemllain's tomb was also sealed as thoroughly as any tomb need be.

IV

A Final Coronation

Gloomily he felt his way back along the passage and pushed against the intervening wall of rock. There were boulders as wide as he was tall, and the spaces between were packed solid with lesser rubble. Given slaves and equipment enough, he might clear out another crevice. Dwassllir could perhaps burrow through, but the giant was probably a mangled keystone in the barrier right now.

Burnt pitch stung his groping fingers, and Kane tugged the extinguished torch out from under some debris. Since there secured little else to do, he sat down and struck a fire. The torch alight once more, the rock slide appeared no less substantial. Angrily Kane kicked at a toppled boulder.

Air fanned the torch flame, however, pointing a yellow beckoning finger back into the burial cavern. Remembering this cave was a branch of a greater plexus, Kane eagerly sought to trace the faint stir of wind.

As he crossed the chamber, Kane saw the effects of the rock slide within the cavern. The sudden grinding force had sent a shudder through the tired stone, so that stalactites had plummeted like crystal lightning bolts from their eternally dark heaven. One had missed spearing Brotemllain by scant yards.

A sighing wind breathed corpse breath through a gaping pit many yards across at the cavern's one end. The explosive concussions that rocked the stone had not been the fantasy of a head blow then. Evidently in the chain reaction shock wave which the slide had drummed the brittle stone, a large section of rock from the high ceiling had struck here. Its impact had driven through the chamber floor to reveal another

cavern beneath this one. The network of caves must bore through the mountains like the tortuous course of a feasting worm, thought Kane, peering into the pit.

Wind gusted faintly through the hole, bringing a sick smell of dampness—a stale, unclean animal smell that intrigued Kane. It seemed he could hear the rush of unseen waters. An underground river probably—deep underground it must be, too. The wind stole in through rotted chinks in the mountains' shell most likely. At least Kane hoped his deductions were correct.

The floor of this new cavern appeared to be about seventy-five feet below him. The collapsing stone had made a chaotic incline down which progress seemed possible. "I've found another road to Hell," Kane muttered aloud.

A rustle beyond him made him look to its source; then he knew he was on the threshold of Hell. At the edge of light, danced a cockroach—incredibly, a bone white cockroach nearly a yard in length. With chitinous concentration, it was nuzzling a dead bat, and it waved its antennae querulously at the offending light. In disbelief Kane tossed a rock in its direction, and the roach scuttled off chuckling into the darkness.

Fascinated, Kane returned to the pit and thrust his torch out over the aperture. Near the incline's base two white-furred creatures raised blind eyes to the light and slunk away squealing in fear. And Kane recognized them, as rats the size of jackals.

Understanding came to him. Water, air—the caverns below held life. But an obscenely distorted form of life it was. Probably these outsized creatures had evolved from cave dwellers who somehow were trapped beneath the surface ages ago, or maybe retreated there from choice when the land became desert. In primeval night, without seasons, without light, they had mutated to grotesque, primitive forms adapted to the demented savagery of their environment. Failing stone had crushed bats as well as other nameless things, and now the scent of blood was luring the monstrous cave creatures to this area.

And what else dwells below, wondered Kane uneasily. He drew away from the pit, deciding that so certain a path to Hell could rest untrod until all other chances of escape were eliminated. Even digging out through the passage seemed a brighter prospect.

As he returned to the rock fall, he caught the sound of stone grating on stone. For a moment he feared the slide was shifting, but as he watched tensely he, saw this was not so. Excitement cutting through despondency, Kane quickly stepped to the barrier and rhythmically pounded against a boulder with a chunk of rock.

After a pause, his tapping was dimly echoed from the opposite side. So the giant had escaped the avalanche. His strength could clear the passage if it were at all possible.

Eagerly Kane began to dig into his side of the barrier. Not daring to contemplate another slide, he strained his powerful back to roll away small boulders, tore his fingers scrabbling doglike through the chipped stone. Luckily it was a bed of broken rock that had slid into the passage, rather than a solid stone shelf.

Time crawled immeasurably, marked only by the dwindling torch and the deepening excavation. Kane's hands were raw and blistered when a sudden wrenching of stone tore open a patch of daylight. Filtered by distance and dust, the ray of sunlight seemed of blinding brilliance to his eyes.

"Dwassllir!" shouted Kane, peering through the chink in the barrier. A shaft perhaps the size of a man's head had been formed between the angle of two boulders, although several feet of debris yet blocked the passage.

A huge brown eye squinted back at him. "Kane?" The giant sounded pleasantly surprised. "So you dodged the slide, manling! You're as hard to kill as legend tells!"

"Can you get me out of here?"

"Can if I'm going to get myself in!" Dwassllir returned stubbornly. "I think I can prop up these boulders so we can dig out space enough for me to crawl through."

"One of the characteristics of higher life forms is the ability to learn by experience," grumbled Kane, bending his back to dislodge a portion of rubble. But the giant's determination was as unyielding as the rock about them.

Slowly the crevice began to reappear, and with freedom outlined in an ever broadening patch of light, the grueling work seemed less fatiguing. Only a precariously balanced jumble of boulders remained.

But this time warning came too late.

A sudden shriek of rasping stone as Dwassllir recklessly hauled back on one of the piled boulders. Released from pressure, a second slab of rock plunged forward like a catapult missile. Kane yelled and tried to dodge. He had been unbalanced with effort, and even his blurring speed was too slow to evade the tumbling projectile.

Thundering as it struck, the slab caromed crazily upon the piled boulders, spun about and smashed against the wall where Kane stood. Kane hissed in pain. At the last instant he had twisted behind a sheltering boulder. This had absorbed the impact of the falling slab, but the explosive force had jammed the intervening rock against his thighs, pinning him to the wall.

Blood oozed from torn skin, trickled into his boots. Grimacing in pain as he tried to wriggle free, Kane discovered he had escaped crushed bones by the smallest fraction.

Miraculously, the rest of the pile had held stable. Dwassllir was cautiously poking at the opening. "Kane? Damn! You're harder to kill than a snake! Can you squeeze out of there?"

"I can't!" grunted Kane straining to slide the rock. "Lot of rock fragments all, jammed together, holding it in place! My feet are pinned in!" He cursed and writhed against his pillory, scraping off more skin as the only evident result.

"Well, I'll pull you out as I dig through," boomed Dwassllir reassuringly, and he once more attacked the rockslide.

But Kane heard sounds of grating rock not turned by Dwassllir's hand. From within the burial cavern he could hear a heavy body climbing over loose stone.

Teeth bared in defiant snarl, Kane stared wild-eyed into the funeral chamber.

At first he thought the corpse of King Brotemllain had risen on skeletal limbs, for wavering in the darkness he could discern two ruby coals throwing back the torch light. But the crown had not moved and still made a sullen glow above the throne.

These were truly eyes he saw—eyes that held him in a baleful glare. Climbing from the aperture in the cavern floor came a creature from beneath the abyss of night.

Sabretooth! Or nightmare spawn of sabretooth tiger and stygian darkness. The gargantuan creature that shambled forth from the timeless caverns of night was as demented a progeny of its natural forebears as

were the other grotesque cave beasts Kane had seen. Rock crunched beneath taloned tread as it stalked from the gaping pit, an albino behemoth more than double the stature of its fearsome ancestor. Dripping jaws yawned hungrily in a cough of challenged—sabre-toothed jaws that could close upon Kane as a cat snaps up a rat.

Lord Tloluvin alone might know what fantastic demons stalked the unlighted caverns that crawled down into his hellish realm, what depraved savagery in their nighted netherworld bred the cave beasts to grotesque giantism. Drawn by the noise and the scent of blood, this monster had left its sunless lair to hunt on the threshold of a land barred to its demonic kin for uncounted centuries.

It sensed its prey.

Unable to squirm free, Kane drew his sword for a hopeless defense. The cave creature had located him—in the darkness its hunting senses must be preternaturally keen—but it hesitated to spring. Seemingly it was confused by the wan rays of sunlight trespassing upon its realm.

The torch lay thrust between rocks almost within Kane's reach. By a series of desperate lunges he succeeded in spearing it on his sword tip and drawing it to him. Answering the sabretooth's growl, he swung the brand to flaring brilliance. The cat retreated somewhat, still intent on its trapped prey, but uncertain how to cope with this blazing light that seared its all but sightless eyes.

"Dwassllir! Can you break through?" The torch had burned through much of its length, so that the dwindling flame stung Kane's fingers.

The giant groaned with frantic effort. "There's a slab of rock midway I can't shift without bringing down the whole slide! If I had a beam I could use for bracing, I could grub out the boulders holding it up and crawl through! Not enough room through there otherwise!"

The sabretooth coughed angrily and advanced a step, stubby tail twitching. Its hunger would soon overwhelm its caution, Kane realized in sick dread, as the cat drew its mammoth bulk into a crouch. In a minute its spring would crush him against the stone.

Eyes blazing feral hatred, Kane steadied his sword. There would be time for only one hopeless thrust as the cat's irresistible spring splintered his chest to pulpy ruin, but Kane meant for his slayer to feel his steel.

"I'll try for his throat when he leaps!" Kane shouted grimly. "Wound him bad as I'm able! Go back and hunt up a log to brace with, Dwassllir. If my sword thrusts deep enough to cripple, there's a chance you can kill this beast with your axe. Brotemllain's crown waits there for you, and when you return to your people you can tell them the price of its winning!"

Dwassllir was tearing away rubble furiously, though Kane did not risk a glance to note its progress. "Keep the cat back as long as you can, Kane!" His voice became muffled. "It was my doing got you into this, and I'll not abandon you like a slinking coward!"

The torch was sputtering; moments of life remained for both flame and wielder. Came a low rumble of shifting stone, but Kane glared unwaveringly into the cat's wrathful eyes. The tiger started, spat in sudden bafflement. Kane braced himself to meet its deadly lunge, then saw in amazement that the sabretooth was edging away.

A flaming length of trunkwood slithered across the stones, propelled by a bass roar front down low. Turning in disbelief, Kane saw Dwassllir's grimy face grinning triumphantly up at him from beneath a jutting shelf of rock.

"Made it, by damn!" the giant bellowed. He grunted breathlessly as he wriggled his colossal frame through the burrow he had dug. "Used my axe to shore up that main slab! She creaked some, but her haft's seasoned hickory, and she'll likely hold till we're out of here!"

At the sudden appearance of a creature rivaling its own awesome bulk, the sabretooth had retreated into the darkness of the cavern. Dwassllir shoved his torch farther down the passage, then bent to Kane. A heave of his mighty shoulders drew back the imprisoning stone.

Kane pitched forward. Biting his lips against the agony, he slithered out of the crevice to freedom.

"Can you walk, manling?"

Wincing, Kane took a few unsteady strides. "Yes, though I'd rather ride."

The giant hefted the torch. "I'll see King Brotemllain now," he declared.

"Don't be a fool, Dwassllir!" Kane protested. "Without your axe you're no match for that monster! You haven't driven it off—it's still prowling in the cavern! We'll be lucky to crawl out before it decides to attack!" The giant brushed him aside.

"Look, at least let's draw back and give that cat a chance to leave! We can find timber to shore up the ledge and free your axe! Then we'll try for the crown!"

"Not enough time!" Dwassllir's face was resolute. "I never really expected that axe to hold. It'll give way any second, and this shaft will be sealed forever! Can't even risk trying to wrench it free! The torch will keep the beast at bay long enough to get the crown. Besides, he won't be the only demon to crawl up from the pit. You don't need to stay, though."

Kane swore and limped after him.

"Hal Sabretooth!" roared Dwassllir, scooping up a broken section of stalactite. A growl answered him from the cavern's echoing recesses. "Sabretooth! Do you know me? My ancestors were your enemy! We fought your forebears in ages past and made necklaces for our women from your pretty fangs! Hear me, sabretooth! Though you're three times the size of your tawny ancestor, I've no fear of you! I am Dwassllir, last true son of the old kings! I've come for my crown! Hide in your hole, sabretooth—or I'll have a white fur cloak to wear with my royal crown!"

The giant's challenge echoed through the cavern, rolled back by the sabretooth's angry snarl. Somewhere in the shadows the cat paced stiff-legged, but the cacophony of echoes made its position uncertain. Bats swooped in panic; dust and bits of stone trickled over them. Kane shifted his sword uneasily, not caring to think what silent blow might strike back.

"King Brotemllain! The legends of my race do not lie!" breathed Dwassllir in awe. Reverently he stood before the throne of the ages-dead hero, his face aglow with visions of ancient glory. Reflected in his eyes was crimson brightness from the ruby crown.

The giant discarded his stalactite club, and stretched to touch the dead king's crown. With gentle strength he broke it free from its encrusted setting. "Grandsire, your children have need of this..."

An avalanche of ivory-fanged terror, the sabretooth bolted from the darkness. Shattering silence with its killing scream, it leaped for the giant's unprotected back. Off guard, Dwassllir pivoted at the final instant to half evade the cat's full rush. Its crushing impact hurled giant and cave beast against the throne and onto the cavern floor.

Jaws locked in Dwassllir's shoulder, the tiger raked furiously against his back, talons tearing deep gashes. Kane limped in, sword flashing. But his movements were clumsy, and at first slash a blow of the creature's paw spun him away. He fell heavily at the foot of the throne and shook his head dully to clear his vision.

Dwassllir howled and lurched to his knees, huge hands clawing desperately to dislodge the murderous fangs. His flailing arm touched the fallen torch and he seized it instantly, smashing its blazing end into the monster's face. Seared by the blinding heat, the sabretooth released its death grip with an enraged shriek, and the giant's punishing kick flung them apart.

Smoke hung over the cat's gory maw. Gouts of scarlet spurted from the giant's deeply gouged shoulder. "Face to face, sabretooth!" roared Dwassllir wildly. "Skulker in shadow! Slinking coward! Dare now to attack your master face to face!"

Even as the tiger crouched to spring, Dwassllir leaped upon it, crippled left arm brandishing the torch. They grappled in midair, and the cavern seemed to quake at their collision. Over and over they rolled, torch flung wide, while Kane groggily tried to regain his feet. The giant struggled grimly to stave off those awful fangs, to writhe atop the sabretooth's greater bulk. Fearsome jaws champed on emptiness as they fought, but its slashing claws were goring horrible wounds through the giant's flesh.

Stoically enduring the agony, Dwassllir threw all his leviathan strength into tightening his grip on the cat's head. He bellowed insanely—curses of pain, of fury—locked his teeth in the beast's ear and ripped away its stump with taunting laughter. Life blood poured over his limbs, made a slippery mat of scarlet-sodden white fur. Still he howled and jeered, chanted snatches of ancient verse—sagas of his race—and pounded the sabretooth's skull against stone.

With a sudden wrench, Dwassllir hauled himself astride the cat's back. "Now die, sabretooth!" he roared. "Die knowing defeat as did your scrawny grandsires!"

He dug his knees into the creature's ribs and clamped heels together beneath its belly. The cat tried to roll, to dislodge him, but it could not. Great fists knotted over frothed fangs, arms locked champing jaws apart; Dwassllir bunched his shoulders and heaved backward. Gasping, coughing breath snorted from the cat's nostrils; its struggle was no longer to attack. For the first time in centuries, a sabretooth knew fear.

Blood gleamed a rippling pattern across the straining muscles of the giant's broad back. Irresistibly his hold tightened. Inexorably the tiger's spine bowed backward. An abrupt, explosive snap as vertebrae and sinew surrendered.

Laughing, Dwassllir twisted the sabretooth's head completely around. He spat into its dying eyes.

"Now then, King Brotemllain's crown!" he gasped, and staggered away from the twitching body. The giant reeled, but stood erect. His fur garments were shredded, dark and sticky. Blood flowed so freely as to shroud the depth and extent of his wounds; flaps of flesh hung ragged, and bone glistened yellow as he moved.

He groaned as he reached the throne and slumped down with his back braced against it. Kane found his senses clear enough to stand and knelt beside the stricken giant. Deftly his hands explored the other's wounds, sought vainly to stanch the bright spurting blood from the sabre gouges. But Kane was veteran of too many battles not to know his wounds were mortal.

Dwassllir grinned gamely, his face pale beneath splashed gore. "That, Kane, is how my ancestors overcame the great beasts of Earth's dawn."

"No giant ever fought a creature like this," Kane swore, "nor killed it bare-handed!"

The giant shrugged weakly. "You think not, manling? But you don't know the legends of our race, Kane. And the legends are truth, I know that now! Fire and Ice! Those were heroic days!"

Kane looked about the cavern, then bent to retrieve a fallen circle of gold. The rubies gleamed like Dwassllir's life blood; the crown was heavy in his hands. And though there was a fortune in his grasp, Kane no longer wanted King Brotemllain's crown.

"This is yours now," he muttered, and placed the crown upon Dwassllir's nodding brow.

The giant's head came erect again, and there was fierce pride in his face—and sadness. "I might have led them back to those lost days of glory!" he whispered. Then: "But there'll be another of my race, perhaps—another who will share my vision of the great age!"

He signed for Kane to leave him. Already his eyes looked upon things beyond this lonely cavern in a desolate waste. "That was an age to live in!" he breathed hoarsely. "An age of heroes!"

Kane somberly rose to his feet. "A great race, a heroic age—it's true," he acknowledged softly. "But I think the last of its heroes has passed."