

Reflections for the Winter of My Soul
Karl Edward Wagner

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

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

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

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

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

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

A sudden hideous movement halted their slow withdrawal! The corpse had lurched upward from the slippery stones! Supporting itself with its arms, it sat half-upright and glared at them with wide and sightless eyes. Red slobbering lips fought to form words.

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

"Death comes! A man! A man not man! Death for all!"

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

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

I. The Rider in the Storm

Kane at last was forced to admit to himself that he was totally lost, that for the past hour he had been without any sense of direction whatsoever. He kicked his plodding horse onward, cursing the fate that had set him abroad in this frozen wasteland during what seemed to be the worst blizzard in his long memory. The shaggy steed was close to floundering with exhaustion, for even its rugged north-bred endurance had been overtaxed by the days of flight which had left them lost in this fantastic ice storm. Two impressions filled Kane's weary mind. One was a sensation of unbearable, soul crushing cold--cold accumulated during the days of travel through the wintered land and now multiplied by this needled wind of ice. The chill sought for him through the thick folds of heavy fur that surrounded him, and Kane knew that when he stopped moving, he would quickly freeze to death.

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

Since noon Kane had often been able to catch sight of them, so close had they gained on him. Knowing that they would almost inevitably overtake him by nightfall, he had welcomed the sudden blizzard when it had come. Although he doubted if even this could cover his tracks from the ken of those grim hunters, he hoped to gain invaluable time--possibly to recover his lead over them. But the storm had become a screaming nightmare of white in which Kane had lost his way completely, and now frozen death joined with those others who sought to bring down the ice-encrusted man who slumped forward in his saddle. Many days behind him and to the southeast lay the independent principality of Rader, once the northmost province of the old Serranthonian Empire, but now broken away in the collapse of the Empire which had followed the extinction of the line of Halbros-Serrantho. Rader had become a frontier backwater after the dynastic wars had destroyed the strength and wealth of the central states and had created a band of desolation cutting Rader off from the civilization to the south. Law had been lost in the imperial disintegration and never restored. In obedience to ancient principle, brute power shaped chaos into a more orderly framework, and Rader had been ruled for the past century (when it was ruled at all) by a variety of warlords. It had been a motley succession, for the land was of little value or importance. Thus its rulers had usually been petty and relatively unambitious men--old nobility, adventurers, robber barons, and the like.

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

To Rader had come Kane in the night. As the mercenary general of the Prophet's cavalry, Kane had both been creator of the fighting arm of the Dark Crusade as well as the cause of its ultimate failure. Treachery on Kane's part had first sundered the Sword of Sataki, but Orted's final insane double-cross had brought

on disaster for them both. Orted had escaped the ensuing slaughter of his followers, but Kane was trapped by the victorious army of Jarvo. To avoid capture by his enemies he had entered that unhallowed interdimensional corridor cursed by ancients as the Lair of Yslsl. The torments he encountered within Yslsl's cosmic web of soulless horror were such that it might have been better to have accepted the mere physical torture and death from those he had thus escaped.

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

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

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

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

"Easy, boy," he murmured through his ice-hung beard. "Let you rest just a minute." But only a minute, he told himself, and stamped his frozen boots, wearily brushing off the crust of ice that enclosed his body. A bed of snow beckoned him to its softness, but he hurled aside its temptation. He would not accept defeat this easily. He had cheated death time beyond comprehension, and if he lost here in the storm, his adversary must take him not gracefully, but struggling blindly onward past the extremes of his power. That this frozen elemental fury should be his doom infuriated Kane, and he glared defiantly into the scouring wind. Frustration. His enemy now was utterly intangible--a cosmic entity that heedlessly had engulfed him--whose massive presence now tore at him, smothered his life fire. In no way could he even force his destroyer to take notice of his existence.

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

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

As soon as he felt clear he slowed his mount's headlong flight to a safer pace. "What in the name of

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

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

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

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

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

This was infinity.

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

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

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

He caught the smell of wood smoke on the wind and pulled up. Had his hunters also found the trees, he wondered--or perhaps he had come upon someone else in this wilderness. He followed the smoke hopefully. Should it be the fire of strangers, he would share it one way or another. If he found the Satakis... Well, he had been hunted long enough. Kane loosened his sword from its ice bound scabbard.

At least the cold iron would then find warmth. They would not expect an attack, and maybe with surprise, and if his strength had not been fatally drained by the storm...

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

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

Not bothering to puzzle over this good fortune, Kane pushed aside the gate enough to pass through. The horses hooves clattered hollowly across the courtyard, as Kane shouted wildly, striving to awaken someone within. Just as he reached the manor's main doorway, the animal stumbled and fell, pitching the rider upon the stones. Kane twisted clumsily, too benumbed for his usual lightning reflexes to serve him. He fell heavily before the door, rolling against it.

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

II. Things Found in the Storm

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

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

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

He was in a small, stone room, furnished by a few benches, some chairs and a heavy table drawn near the large fire that blazed against one wall. An antechamber, he surmised, from its plainness--probably where the porter and stewards kept attendance on the main door. Kane's ice-crusting cloak had been removed, and a heavy fur rug was thrown about him. Two servants supported him in a half supine position before the fire; several others and a very sleepy maid milled about the room and doorway. Holding the cup to his lips was a tousled girl of elfish beauty. From her magnificent robe of white snowcat and the emerald set ring on her delicate hand, Kane knew her to be a lady of high estate. A mane of pale blond tresses framed a perfect face from which a pair of wide, grey eyes shone. Together with a pointed chin and straight, finely chiseled nose, she presented the picture of a somewhat whimsical pixie--a mouth made for quick smiles now set in concern. Her age might be from late teens to early twenties.

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

sleep of honest folk!" he blustered good-naturedly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The wind must have shut it--for I didn't," Kane broke in.

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

Kane remained silent.

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

Kane bowed. "You are most gracious. I am deeply thankful for your hospitality," he said formally, speaking the Carrasahli with little difficulty. He watched his company cautiously. "My name is Kane."

There was no reaction, so he went on. "My profession is fighting, but at present I am without a position. I was heading toward Enseljos to see if Winston could use my services in his border war with Chectalos, but I strayed off course trying to save some miles from the usual trails. When the storm caught me, I was very well on my way to being lost."

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

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

It was his eyes that bothered Troylin. He had noticed them from the first. It was to be expected, for Kane's eyes were the eyes of Death! They were blue eyes, but eyes that glowed with their own light. In those cold blue gems blazed the fires of blood madness, of the lust to kill and destroy. They poured forth infinite hatred of life and promised violent ruin to those who sought to meet them. Troylin caught an image of that powerful body striding over a battlefield, killer's eyes blazing and red sword dealing carnage to all before it.

The baron hastily avoided those eyes and repressed a shudder. Vaul! What manner of man was this

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

III. Prisoners of the Storm

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

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

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

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

"Who the hell are you?" Kane growled.

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

"Why were you in here?" snarled Kane dangerously.

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

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

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

Kane regained his temper with painful effort. "Would you care to examine me now?" he asked innocently. "Damn your insolent hide!" shrieked Lystric and stamped toward the door, a stately exit which he ruined by glancing behind in apprehension. Halting at the door he glowered back. "The baron directed me to ask you to dine with him shortly, should I find you not too weak to stir!"

"Send my thanks and tell him I accept."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lystric went on hurriedly. "But there isn't any meat left that hasn't been cooked. So why not eat just a

bite..."

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

For the others the meal proceeded with relative quiet.

With the business of eating completed, the dinner began to gather steam. Servants cleared away the debris and settled down to the more serious duty of keeping their master and his guest well supplied with ale. Kane prepared himself for a long evening of drinking and conversation, aware that Troylin expected him to repay the baron's hospitality by entertaining him. It appeared to be developing into a most comfortable evening. At the lower tables, the baron's retainers and men-at-arms were making a lusty charter, serving wenches made free with the ale, and the great fire was blazing. Even Henderin was quiet, for the moment slowly drawing pictures on the table with an ale dipped finger. In the shadow of a column close by the high table a tall man toyed with a lute.

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

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

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

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

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

He became conscious of all unpleasant sensation of scrutiny after a while and looked for the source. In the shadows slouched a figure with a lute, a lean man whose eyes gleamed a startling red in the firelight. Following Katie's gaze, Troylin caught sight of its object and called out, "Ah, Evingolis! There you are! Wondered where you were lurking tonight. Come over and give us a tune! We've been jabbering too hard to do any serious drinking." Turning to Kane he said, "This is Evingolis, the most accomplished minstrel you'll ever have the pleasure of hearing. I had the fortune of attaching him to my patronage this summer, and he's a delight to have around on these winter nights." He went on to describe the many virtues of the minstrel.

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

The rising lament that concluded the song died out with a keening moan from the lute. He was an artist,

conceded Kane, who could not recall hearing a better performance of that difficult poem. Men shuffled their feet and made uneasy sounds in the stillness following the song. "Excellent!" commended Troylin after a pause. "You always have something now for us, don't you. Ah, how about another, Evingolis. One a bit more rousing for this cold night."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IV. Hunters in the Snow

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

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

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

all that snow."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hounds raced through the snow baying joyously, within their shaggy coats oblivious to the subzero cold.

Despite the crystalline coldness of the air and frozen ground, the distant sun shone through the clear sky and dazzled the hunters' eyes. Even under the trees the bright reflection from the snow was significant; beyond the forest it was overwhelming.

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

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

Kane rode with his heavy sword strapped to his saddle in easy reach. Evingolis had laughed at this.

"We're on a hunting party, wanderer, not a war party!"

Kane hadn't cared for the albino's jibe, but remembering that minstrels and jesters were expected to be impertinent, he had only shrugged. "A man of my profession finds his sword a life long companion."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was no presentiment of disaster. Kane's quarry had been fresh and the hounds had already chased the other elk far. Thus the second stag had run far before the pack had been able to gain. However, the greater endurance of the dogs along with the lesser hindrance posed for them by the snow soon told, and with the pack hard on his heels the bull elk chose a small ravine to make his stand. Only three dogs had

followed this second quarry, and they were unable to bring the great elk down. Around him they pranced, slashing at the giant, then darting back to avoid the deadly hooves and antlers. When the hunters came upon them, one hound had already been gored to death and the stag bled from a dozen tears in his mighty body. Kane cast his spear with fatal accuracy, hitting the elk in the neck. His throat transfixed, the forest monarch staggered, trumpeting in agony. The remaining hounds closed in for the kill, as two more spears stabbed into the mortally wounded elk. Shouting in triumph the hunters surrounded the body of their prey, lying red in the snow; two hurriedly dismounted and ran to pull off the crazed hounds.

At which point the wolves attacked.

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

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

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

The hounds closed with the wolves with the unquenchable hatred of the tamed canine for his wild brother. At least one wolf rolled away from the snarling melee with his eyes glazed in death, and several others were flung back with crushed legs and gushing wounds. But numbers and wild ferocity overwhelmed the valiant struggle of the great hounds, and their fearless defiance ended in crimson ruin. Kane had been among the first reached by the wolves' deadly ambush. Only his fantastic reflexes and blinding speed had saved him from their initial rush. Twisting in his saddle as the first beast had sought to leap upon him from behind, his powerful hands had locked in the wolf's ruff. Kane whirled the huge creature about and flung it from him; the wolf dashed against a tree close at hand and caromed into the snow with a broken back. In a flash Kane's mighty sword arm snatched the blade whistling from its scabbard. A second killer had followed almost on the heels of the first, but Kane's draw was faster and the keen blade sheared through the beast's skull. His horse reared in panic as the others closed in, and Kane had to clamp his legs to its flanks tightly to stay on. Another wolf went down, its skull smashed by the plunging hooves.

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

And Kane was alone with the wolves.

Half a dozen gray killers circled their prey warily. Some were crippled and bleeding, but they showed no

hint of abandoning the fast man. Their blood fury was completely aroused, and their savage minds were set on an unshakeable goal--to drag down the human and steep their muzzles in his blood. Kane glared back at them, lips drawn in a snarl and killer's eyes blazing with hellfire. His own insatiable lust to kill and to destroy burned incandescently within his spattered frame. For the space of several heartbeats killer looked upon killer.

Their attack was a gray blur of coordinated fury. Two wolves went for Kane, while the others attacked his steed. The wolf on his left Kane met with a blinding sword stroke that clove the beast's skull asunder. The other wolf arched through the air in a graceful, deadly leap that carried it into Kane's lap. Its fangs snapped shut spasmodically, but without aim--for its yellow eyes were already stark in death. A dagger had buried itself hilt-deep in its throat. Right-handed, Kane had thrown the weapon with unerring aim, just as the wolf had begun its leap. The wolf had died even as its fellow had fallen under Kane's sword. The heavy carcass in his lap encumbered Kane for one deadly instant. Before he could toss it aside, another wolf buried its fangs in the horse's neck. Cursing, Kane broke free of the carcass; his sword flashed out and chopped through the wolf's neck. But the damage had been done, and with a shrill scream Kane's horse fell to the frozen ground.

Already Kane had vaulted clear of the saddle, and he landed catlike in the snow as his horse crashed to the earth in mortal agony. Only a split second get his balance, and the last three wolves were on him. He thrust out his sword; the wolf tried to twist aside and avoid the blade but was too slow. As the long blade transfixing it, another wolf leapt at Kane from the right, even as the third gathered its feet. No time to pull free his sword, Kane caught the wolf in full leap with his free hand. Swinging the beast by its foreleg, he hurled it aside and jerked his sword up. The third wolf had been injured and was just a little slow in joining its fellows' rush. Kane's rising blade caved in its side as the wolf leapt for the man's throat. Meanwhile the second wolf had recovered its balance after landing harmlessly in the snow. Kane flashed around to meet this last adversary. The two last combatants in the death-filled ravine faced each other in deadly concentration. For an instant their two minds met in understanding, in mutual admiration of the other's sheer ferocity and awful capability. The wolf made a movement as if to turn and flee, then whirled and sprang for the man in one mighty leap of ripping fury. Kane's stroke almost missed the twisting gray blur. But not quite. And then only one living thing moved amidst the carnage.

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

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

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

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

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

After a few miles Kane heard a distant scream--a terrified plea for help. He considered a moment and decided to check it out. The cry seemed human enough, and it was definitely feminine. Kane cautiously,

nonetheless hastily, guided his mount toward the cry's source, curious to learn what number of throat produced it.

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

Yet the screams sounded familiar, and acting on a hunch Kane spurred his reluctant mount forward. Two wolves were snarling around the trunk of a large, low-hanging fir. Perched on a branch was the center of their attention--Breenanin.

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

He halted under the tree and helped her from the branches; she landed in a sobbing heap in his arms.

Kane tried to get a few questions in, but Breenanin only clung to him and whimpered. So he made what he hoped might sound like soothing, sympathetic sounds, and let her run down.

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

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

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

"But all of a sudden this pack of wolves came after me. I knew I couldn't outrun them in the forest, so when my horse ran under that low tree back there, I slowed him enough to grab a branch and scramble off." She sniffled. "I thought my arms would pull out, but I knew I had to hang on. One of them nearly grabbed my leg before I could climb clear of them. But most of them kept chasing the horse--I guess they got him, but I didn't see--and just the two stayed to wait for me to come down. So I shouted and yelled hoping someone would come by from the hunt and hear me. And that's what you did," she concluded.

Kane was amazed at the girl's coolness. Most women would have been too panic stricken, too stupid, too weak. Yet Breenanin had survived and seemingly was relatively calm once again. It was unbelievable. He rode into the clearing and saw with relief that Troylin and his party were waiting there. Intact and complete with elk. They shouted an exuberant greeting, then fell into mystified silence at the bloody rider along with his prize.

"Kane! What the hell!" gasped Troylin in amazement.

"Here's your daughter--safe enough," Kane said. "The rest are back with the elk. They won't be following us."

V. Tales on a Winter Evening

The hunting banquet was a rather dismal affair. These chases often had their fill of danger, and casualties of the hunt were frequently toasted to in memoriam. But five corpses were too many. Men drank their ale

too seriously for fun, and in place of the usual raucous horseplay small groups spoke of the weird attack in quiet, anxious tones. The behavior of the wolves was decidedly unnatural, and not a few old legends were retold in the gloomy shadows of the dining hall.

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

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

He caught sight of Evingolis, who was sitting in the shadows as usual, watching the diners while he gnawed a rib of venison. "Minstrel!" he rumbled. "This place has less life than a wake. Let's have some music to liven things a little." A raucous cheer went up from the diners in anticipation.

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

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

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

"Let's have something in Carrasahli!" roared a drunken soldier.

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

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

In time this fool's creation multiplied all through the land,
And disgusted those before them with their drivel,
Content to live a wormlike existence for the pleasure of their god,
Who in his mindless conceit only giggled with his dolls.
Yet in one there rose rebellion with this crawling in cosmic dung--
No maggot hot a serpent was this son of divinity's folly.

And in his hellish fury at the crooning lies of that creator,
He chose to be his own master and defied this nameless god,
And with his hands he slew his brother--choicest plaything.
Now despair racked the broken mind of this insane elder god,
For he saw the flaws within his cherished children
And recognized himself as the author of that image.
This rebel he cursed in rage to bleak, eternal wandering,
And gave him eyes of a killer, so all know the Mark of Kane.

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

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

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

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

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

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

VI. A Man Not Man

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

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

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

The creature unlocked the gate and effortlessly swung it half open. Into the courtyard the hungry wolves

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

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

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

The screams were stilled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

VII. "One of us..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What are we doing!" Breenanin shouted over the ugly growls of the crowd. "You stand there talking about murdering someone who's never given any of you a just cause to complain! A month ago you would have died for Baron Troylin! Time and again I've heard you congratulate yourselves on being in the service of one of the most generous and easy going gentry in the land! And now because you're

suddenly frightened, you talk of killing his only son--whom all of you thought was a great guy before his sickness! You even talk of massacring all of us! I'd prefer letting the wolves in--they'd show more gratitude! You don't even know if Henderin had anything to do with these murders!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

both factions could accept.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And there are plenty of legends and rumors and wild stories that I've encountered about a man called Kane. And none of them speaks well for him! At best he's a treacherous, murderous rogue who's figured in more plots and dark schemes than Lord Thoem and his demons ever dreamed of! And at worst the legends hint he's some sort of immortal cursed by the gods to wander the earth and bring havoc wherever he stops!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

VIII. One by One

The hour was getting on toward midnight. Most of the castle's inhabitants had sought their beds for what sleep their nerves would allow them. All were not asleep, however. Several men stood guard outside the chambers of Lystric the astrologer. These were in the northwest wing of the castle--a tower set apart from the more frequented hallways. This was convenient for both occupants: Lystric could pursue his studies in quiet, with a good view of the stars from the tower's summit, while Henderin could rave and howl as he saw fit without disturbing the others. The open area on top of the tower was used by Lystric. Immediately below this was the chamber wherein Henderin was confined; its one window was barred and overlooked a seventy-five foot drop to the courtyard, and the door which opened onto the tower stairs was thick and heavily locked. Below this was another room given over to Lystric's studies and filled with a clutter of sorcerous paraphernalia. Still below, at the base of the tower where it adjoined the main body of the castle, was the room in which Lystric slept. This chamber had two doors: one to the tower stairs which was locked, and the other which opened into the hallway at that end of the castle. This latter door was now bolted from the outside, and five armed men stood guard beside it, keeping close watch over the sleeping astrologer. No one could enter or leave the tower chambers except through that door. A few others were still awake in the great hall. A fire was burning lustily, and those who did not feel like sleep sought its companionship. It had been agreed that for some men to stay awake through the night was an obvious precaution, as well as having guards patrol the hallways in pairs. More would have been better, but the castle's strength had been dangerously cut by the previous attacks.

So Kane sat awake beside the fire, sipping larger quantities of ale than seemed wise and moodily listening to the minstrel. The albino sat in the shadow of the beams as usual, evoking strange melodies from his lute and from time to time singing along to these rare works of departed genius. He was an unusual man, Kane mused, his performance and repertoire displaying fantastic sensitivity and skill. He wondered what made Evingolis content to attach himself to a country bumpkin like Troylin--perhaps something in the minstrel's past had barred from him the richer, more appreciative patrons of the southern nations. Scent of delicate perfume and sparkle of pale gold hair in the warm glow. Breenanin sat down beside him in the hearth light. Kane remembered her face as it had first formed in his vision. Only a few days before was it that he had come so close to frozen death in the storm. Time had no meaning to Kane. A dozen years or as many minutes--once past both fitted into the same span of memory. Either a century ago or just that morning he had fled across the northern wastes--and for how long? It was nothing, for it was past and beyond him. His life was only a minute focus of time, an instant of the present balanced between centuries of past and an unknown duration of future existence. He felt a moment of vertigo, as his mind

hung poised over time's chasm.

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

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

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

She accepted it with a slight smile, uncertain of her feelings toward the other. He was so strange--huge and brutal, every inch a machine of destruction, she sensed. Yet he was civil of speech and manner--and far more erudite than any man of her experience, other than those learned fossils and simpering dandies of the court. There were many contradictions embodied in the big stranger, nor could she hazard a guess to his nationality or even his age. He seemed so inhumanly aloof and alone. He gave her the same sort of eerie thrill that some of Evingolis's strange songs created.

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

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

"Breenanin," she prompted softly.

"Breenanin."

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

I saw her in winter's silent cold light
Clearly, with her warmth upon the sparkle
Of that magical, crystalline night.
And love I knew unspoken passed,
Its timeless warmth, one frozen instant,
Eternally encased in infinite amber.
But what I sensed I could not return;
The instant vanished in that crystalline storm.
In vain do I call through this dancing myriad
Of relinquished emotions, frozen fragments of time.
For the moment has passed, now lost in that swirl--
Splintered shards of time's reflection--
Reflections for the winter of my soul.

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

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

Breenanin shifted in her chair. The minstrel's song had lulled her into an almost trance-like state. "He came to us last summer. Came up from the southlands, I suppose--he never said anything about his past. Sort of wandered about the court in Carrasahl for a while, then attached himself to Father's patronage. We were glad to get him--others offered him more money than we could. He talks occasionally of some far away places he's been, and most of his songs no one can understand. Guess he's just wandering about the world as his fancy suits him.

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

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

She stirred in her sleep, but did not awaken. A half-smile was on her thin lips, and her fine teeth were

white against her pale skin. She was soft and warm in her fur robe. Kane felt an emotion stir within him as he carried her that he had not experienced in long years. It might have been love, but then he could not remember.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kane examined the astrologer. Whatever his schemes or abilities, he would exercise them no more.

Lystric's head was all but torn from his body, and hungry fangs had ripped away most of the soft flesh of his arms and legs. The werewolf had not been able to contain its unspeakable appetite all night.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Running feet and shouts sounded from the hallway.

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

IX. Impasse

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

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

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

"You know you're making a mistake in this," offered Kane.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So we'll just watch you a few days--Henderin too, just to be safe. If the creature strikes again, we'll be sorry for doubting you."

"More than likely you'll be dead--and me with you! And what if nothing more happens?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He shook the thoughts away. Again only guesses and circumstances! Any man here could be shown guilty by that course! Troylin, Evingolis, Tali--any of the baron's men. And she was but a girl! But wasn't the she-wolf fully as dangerous as the male?

X. Fangs in the Night

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

All was silent. Henderin slipped to his window and looked down over the courtyard below. Nothing moved. Satisfied that none watched, Henderin pulled at the stone at the base of the window ledge, grunting with the strain. As he knew it would, the stone tore free of its setting, for the crude mortar which held it in place had been carefully weakened. He placed the heavy stone on the floor of the room, then

turned to the iron bars. With the stone removed, the bars set exposed in their sockets, which had been cut into adjoining faces of the inside and outside stones of the ledge. Henderin easily worked the bars out of their half sockets below and slid them down from their upper attachment to the wall.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sounds of the battle above them penetrated even to the cellar room where Kane was imprisoned. The

guards dropped their dice and listened. "What the hell is that!" gasped Tali in shocked amazement. Kane jumped to the door to see what was happening.

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

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

"Wait! Damn you! Wait!" Kane bellowed futilely. "Come back and let me out of here! Come back!

Thro'ellet take you all!" He shouted after the last man had disappeared up the stairs, but it was useless.

Either out of panic or distrust they had left him here. In disgust he envisioned the fight in the upper floors of the castle and its probable end. Bitterly he pictured himself sitting here helpless while the werewolf and its pack came to finish the prisoner trapped in his cell.

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

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

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

Within her chamber Breenanin listened in terror to the fierce struggle outside her door. She had awakened with these sounds in her ears--the shouts of the castle's defenders and the enraged snarling of the wolves. The death cries of man and beast. She tried to imagine how the battle was turning, but from her chamber she could tell little. And the scenes offered by her terrified imagination drove her to hysteria. On Kane's warning she had provided herself with a silver dagger, although the weapon seemed laughably inadequate. In addition she had tied a silver chain across the fastenings of both tier door and the shutters of her windows. She had little faith in their efficacy, but it had been something she could do.

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

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

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

And through the wreckage of the shutters leapt--Henderin!

Her brother was almost unrecognizable. His fingers were torn and bleeding; his clothing disordered.

There was stark madness in his rolling eyes, and his teeth gnashed wildly. Blood ran upon his face and spotted his chest.

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

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

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

And looked into the face of gore-splattered nightmare!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Had the dagger been as long as a real weapon, the stab would have been a mortal wound. Instead, the werewolf howled in unaccustomed agony and sprang to its feet. Only barely did Breenanin succeed in maintaining her desperate grasp on the dagger's hilt, as the werewolf wrenched itself free in its lunge. Its pale fur now matted with its own blood, the werewolf whirled to face its small assailant. Fury was in

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

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

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

Baron Troylin staggered drunkenly into the room, his mind fogged with pain and horror. Behind him tottered two of his retainers, similarly weakened from numerous wounds. Troylin seemed to regard his shuddering daughter without recognizing her. "All dead," he intoned dully. "All dead but us. The werewolf even smashed in the door where the women were hidden and let his pack loose on them." No one listened to Troylin, not even himself. Only his mind numbly recounted the events of the past half hour. "Wolves everywhere. Those awful bloody fangs. Snapping. Leaping at you from all sides. Once you're down they just tear you to ribbons. Somehow we stopped them. Their leader left them. Werewolf gone we could hold out against the rest. Kill the devils. So damn many though. Drove them off somehow. Finally they stopped coming. Don't know if they're all dead too, or just run off. But we're all that are left." He stopped his mumbling and stared dumbly at his daughter. Slowly his eyes began to focus. He saw her stretched beside the scarlet stained body of... Recognition dawned. Screaming an oath he raced to his son's side and flung his daughter away.

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

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

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

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

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

Stillness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Always?"

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

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

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

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

"So I have a sizable party of humans isolated from their fellows. Next step is to cut off escape. The storm I summoned took care of that part. I almost had you on two occasions that night, but you eluded me

each time. Then it was simply a matter of slowly cutting down their strength until an outright attack could destroy the remnant. My strategy should be obvious to you by now. At first I arranged for my wolves to split the hunt by driving a second elk across your path, then they ambushed your half. They should have killed you then, but again I underestimated you."

"Then you know who I am," said Kane, "--and what I am."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The albino laid aside his lute, still chuckling wolfishly. "Well Kane, this has been a most interesting game. I salute you. You have led an extraordinary career, to use an absurd understatement. I admire you.

Perhaps I understand you. And you of all men are the first to command my respect.

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

Kane had been prepared for the change, but he had not expected its abruptness. One instant the minstrel

stood laughing before him--there was a split-second blur, as if Kane's eyes had momentarily gone out of focus--then a snarling hulk of white furred death was leaping for him!

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

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

Kane suddenly leapt into the air, pivoted in midflight, and lashed out with his boot into the chest of the werewolf. The power of his blow knocked the creature backward, grunting in surprise and pain. The dagger was beyond reach. Kane knew his only chance would be to kill his assailant with sheer physical force. But man against demon seemed hopelessly mismatched. Yet Kane was not an ordinary man. As Evingolis fettered from the surprise kick of the human, Kane hurled himself against the werewolf! Driven with the brutal power of his thick legs, Kane's massive body caught Evingolis off balance and sent him reeling backward over the brink of the stairs. Wrapped in a deadly embrace, man and demon plummeted down the long, stairway, rolling over and over, crashing agonizingly against the steps and wall! With a surge of strength Kane gained a brief contact with the spinning stairway and used the purchase to push their fall over the edge. Splintering the railing, the locked combatants plunged off into space ten feet above the stone floor under them! Kane wrenched himself atop the snarling werewolf just before they smashed onto the floor.

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

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

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

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

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

tightened his strangler's grip about the thick throat of the demon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Epilogue

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

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

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

Kane shivered, suddenly realizing how cold it was.

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