

# Mirage

*Karl Edward Wagner*

Death came shimmering through the afternoon heat.

In silence broken only by cursing, the battleworn band of mercenaries had fled along the dusty mountain road. Overhead the sun burned dimly, scornfully; its heat lanced through the ragged forest cover and seared the disheveled fugitives. Stumbling over scorched stones, they had plodded along in the weary desperation of flight, dust choking their panting breath and smothering them in a grimy blanket compounded of sweat and caked blood.

Half a hundred soldiers of a fallen cause. Men who had gambled their lives for the ambitious bastard brother of Chrosanthe's dainty king. But Jasseartion had proven no fool despite his laces and curious affectations; his spies, his personal army had been as meticulously efficient as his subjects foolishly loyal. In the end, his brother Talyvion had hung moaning in a tiny

cage suspended from the great beams of the same throne room toward which his ambitions had lured him. Now the scattered remnants of his smashed army fled across the land, pursued by Jasseartion's tireless soldiers and vengeful subjects, a bounty on each man's head.

For Kane the bounty was great. Kane was the last of Talyvion's lieutenants still unaccounted for by Jasseartion's so very efficient servants. And although Kane had only entered into the conspiracy shortly before its downfall, his remarkable talent both for cloaked intrigue and open battle had impressed a particular enmity upon Chrosanthe's ruler, and upon his subjects as well. Even to a rebel would come full pardon and more gold than he might earn in ten years' soldiery, so promised the royal proclamation. True, Jasseartion's word had never been so inviolable as to inspire confidence among the fugitives from his well-famed justice, but it was nonetheless a most tempting proposal.

With this in mind, Kane had wrapped his face in bloody bandages, padded his belly to outsize proportions, and covered his mail with a filthy, voluminous cloak. So disguised, he had mingled with a band of fleeing refugees, hoping that neither Jasseartion's followers nor his own companions would recognize this dirty, obese foot soldier with bandaged face as the aristocratic stranger who had joined with Talyvion not long before the latter's fortunes had changed.

Then the searing summer air was filled with the sharp hiss of glinting arrows. Ambush! A detachment of Jasseartion's army had lain in hiding among the trees and the smoldering rocks that enclosed the dusty mountain trail.

Furious at having been caught in ambush along with the sheep he had hoped to masquerade among, Kane broke for cover, his right hand fumbling in the damp folds of his cloak for his sword. A deep wound from the last battle caused his left arm to be still

too weak to use effectively, and although Kane was almost as dexterous with his right arm, he knew he was at a disadvantage in the chaotic fighting that enveloped him.

The king's soldiers rushed upon the stricken mercenaries simultaneously as the last arrows tore into them. Many of their number already writhing upon the burning pathway, the desperate fugitives staggered to make a hopeless stand against their assailants. The first man to reach Kane he hurled back again with a crushing swordblow. Another charged past his comrade's husk and swung an axe in a glittering arc that took all of Kane's strength to turn aside. The axeman snapped backward and raised his weapon once more. Kane cursed impotently. The man would be gutted by now had Kane free use of his left arm. As he sought to face the axe, another soldier fell upon him from his left, just as the axe again swung down. Kane leapt back and caught the axe once more with his blade, frantically dodging his other foe. Twisting his blade, he slashed outward through the axeman's wrist, and as the other dropped his weapon in agony, Kane's return thrust caught him in the ribs.

A second to free the sword. Too long. The other soldier's sword was slicing for him. Kane forced his left arm into action, clumsily grappling with the sword arm that thrust for his trunk. A double wave of pain shook him as his wounded arm only partially deflected the swordblow, and the edge gashed through the heavy cloak and padding to smash against the mail beneath. Kane toppled, his powerful grip yet locked on the other's arm, pulling him to the ground along with himself, and impaling the soldier on his sword as they fell. And as he struck ground with the dying assailant atop him, an impossible weight slammed against Kane's skull. In a black wave of agony he lost consciousness, never knowing whether he had been purposefully struck, or simply kicked by some other pair of combatants.

## I. The Forest by Night

His eyes opened into the cool of night. Groggily he rolled from under the soldier's corpse and sat up. Vision blurred, ground rocked with the roaring pain in his skull. Kane bit his lip and forced himself to his knees. About him lay only the dead.

Gingerly he unwound the heavy bandages that swathed his head and ran fingers over the ache in his skull. It had been a hard blow, but the bandages and his thick red hair had effectively cushioned it. He rose to his feet and disgustedly threw off the enveloping cloak and the slashed padding beneath. His mail had stopped the swordthrust, but the force of the stroke had mashed the links painfully into his side.

A bad deal all around, mused Kane, once more cursing the poor judgment that had led him to seek to hide among the rabble rather than strike out on his own. Still, under the circumstances he had been lucky enough to escape from the collapse of the conspiracy, not to mention to survive this ambush. He looked about him, the light of the newly risen full moon casting sufficient illumination for his exceptional night vision to see clearly.

Silent. Still. Death. Cold moonlight cast over a strange panorama of white shapes strewn carelessly, hopelessly across the dark ground. Not even a hint of wind to break this frozen tableau. Black trees casting shadows—can moonlight cast shadows?—dark shapes clutching, covering the fallen. Contorted young face—had death been so dear with that slash through his

belly? Perhaps the one who was asking Kane some forgotten question when the attack came. Perhaps not. The moonlight gave an unreal illumination to the scene, and faces firm and real by sunlight now seemed hollow, fantastic. Kane was not certain even that the pain in his tormented body was real.

Where am I now? he wondered, forcing thoughts into the blur of his consciousness. Nearly out of the lands claimed to be holdings of Chrosanthe—a very isolated area of the kingdom. Chrosanthians avoided this forest region, and with that in mind the fugitives had sought to escape along this route. Another bad idea, Kane reflected. Jasseartion's vengeance had ignored his subjects' dislike for this particular corner of the realm, but then Talyvion's mercenaries had earned an especial hatred for themselves during the abortive *coup d'état*.

The trees shimmered crazily when Kane gained his feet. At least the cool night air soothed where the scourging sun had lent additional agony to each move. Can't stay here, Kane realized. The soldiers would return for their dead with morning—certainly to loot the corpses. Only nightfall and their dread of the region had kept them from this ritual.

The ghouls. That was it. Kane remembered that the Chrosanthians had fought an uncommonly vicious civil war some two centuries previous. This region had been exceptionally torn apart by the struggle, with the victorious faction relentlessly slaughtering the great lords together with their tenants. Jasseartion's ancestors' handiwork. The area had never been repopulated—several strange legends regarding the fate of those victors who had attempted to establish themselves upon the unburied bones of their luckless predecessors. And that ancient carnage had attracted packs of ghouls to the area—or perhaps made ghouls of the few starving survivors, Kane mused. Yes, every reason to get away from this place as quickly as possible. Damn! For a horse of any description!

Wearily Kane recovered his fallen sword and limped away among the white shapes patterned across the dark ground, his feet slipping occasionally upon still darker patches. Wincing, he tossed his head, but the blur would not leave his vision. A large rock beneath the trees was enticing, and Kane stumbled to its rest, half reclining as upon one of the many thrones that fortune had cast him over the years, and later stolen again from his embrace. Thoem! So many long years! Could any man bear their weight! For a moment a kaleidoscope of bitter memories tumbled through the pain of his mind, doomed centuries of wandering, an outcast from mankind.

Brooding at a time when flight should be his sole concern. Delirium. The nightscape wavered in cadence to the throbbing within his skull, a hoarse roaring that at times engulfed him altogether. And Kane knew he had been struck harder than he had earlier realized. A concussion maybe. Just beautiful! By daylight Jasseartion's soldiers would return to find him sitting here mindlessly raving of fallen, forgotten empires.

His throat was thick with thirst, and he wondered if he might find some wine somewhere among the slain. That was stupid; the mercenaries had had little enough water among them. Wine tastes very good though, especially the white wine they brew in Latroxia. Although many consider it too sour. And wine is good to bathe wounds in, due to the purifying natures of the engendered sting. Salt water reacts similarly, but is useless for drinking purposes. A pity the oceans didn't flow with wine. Many shipwrecked sailors would have applauded this innovation, although it would probably disturb the fish. Once I ate an octopus pickled in wine. Subtle taste, but on the whole an unfortunate meal.

An ocean of wine lifted Kane in its tentacled arms, bobbing him up and down rhythmically, while about him the corpses of these pickled sailors swirled atop the purple waves, and octopi

crept from their seaweed lairs to reach out cautiously.

Sound. Sharp snap. Reflexes cutting through the delirium. Startled into a semblance of alertness, Kane's cold blue eyes searched the battleground suspiciously.

Again cracked the sound, and Kane recognized it this time. It was a harsh, splintering snap such as an animal makes in crunching the marrow bones of its prey.

Now he could distinguish the ghoul. Crouched over its meat on the dark forest road, its dead-white body had resembled one of the corpses upon which it fed. And from the silent trees were slipping other pale, misshapen creatures, their stooped and twisted bodies a sick parody of the human form. So the legends had not lied.

Ghouls normally would not attack an armed man, Kane knew, but their numbers and his disabled state might prove too tempting. Besides, their hunger was apparent—ghouls abhor freshly killed flesh much the same as many men have little appetite for raw meat.

Carefully Kane limped back into the trees. The ghouls had interest only for the rich feast spread before them, hunger overruling their normal caution. A stone grated under his boot, and Kane froze to look about hurt apprehensively. A few pairs of dead, pale, almost luminous eyes stared in his direction, but none of the creatures seemed moved to investigate. Satisfied that he had not been detected, Kane slipped deeper into the shadows of the forest, and once the cover of trees and jutting rock outcrops shielded him altogether, he hurried away from this moonlit scene of horror.

It was Kane's intention to skirt the battlefield through the forest and then to pick up the mountain road once more. With luck he could put quite a few miles behind him by dawn, and

during the daylight rest hidden within the forest. But the road twisted and meandered in a manner unknown to Kane—and as he wandered through the trees attempting to recover his trail, over his mind again crept tendrils of delirium, only momentarily pushed back by shock of immediate danger. An hour passed and Kane was not only utterly lost, but beyond caring as well.

Beneath his boots the earth pitched and yawed, but his sea-legs were up to treading any deck, and Kane strode recklessly into the storm, occasionally staggering against a mast for support. Then the trees whirled maddeningly about him, ensnared like himself in sonic cosmic vortex. Caves underneath the limestone shelves yawned at him, gaping caverns that snapped thunderously, some emitting rank, dismal breath. Under the staring eye of the moon danced thousands of colossal phantoms, tormenting the fool who stumbled through their eldritch circles. Long claws reached for his face, gnarled talons lashed out to knock him sprawling again and again. Faces of those long dead smirked at him from the blackness—sneering visages of ancient enemies, soft faces of old mistresses that abruptly grew stark with age. A spinning phantasmagoria of mocking smiles, and for half of them Kane could not even remember their names.

Eventually he found himself staggering through a rained village. At least it seemed so—these crumbling walls remained solid to his touch, while other figures of his tortured mind faded mistlike into the darkness. He smashed a fist against the stones and studied the pain. Yes, it must be real then. An abandoned village, with vine-covered stone walls still carrying, the charred signature of forgotten fire and pillage. All in ruins now—roofless dwellings, fallen walls—gutted structures whose gloomily gaping windows and doorways made them appear as monolithic skulls to Kane's fevered mind.

Desolation was all pervasive. Only the white shadow of half-hidden bones served evidence of former human

habitation—at least Kane thought he could see these scattered relics discarded among the other debris. Had it not been for curious, narrow paths weaving through the rank underbrush, Kane would have believed no living creature had passed through this dismal artifact of ancient strife in many years.

Full moon silhouetted the deserted castle looming darkly upon the steep hill that overlooked its empty village. In that final battle the castle had fallen alongside the village which had paid it tribute in return for an inadequate protection. A fantastic mass of black stones piled against the moonlight, the crumbling fortress impressed Kane with an even more consuming sense of desolation than did these ruins which lay before its not quite unassailable height.

"There stands your funeral monument!" laughed Kane, pointing to the castle, and the empty windows winked agreement "By the gods, a truly epic tombstone! Right?" The overgrown walls nodded.

Sharp, knifing pain from his wounds: dull, numbing agony of fatigue. Too much. A bed of moss among toppled stones was too tempting. Gratefully Kane dropped onto its cushion. To hell with what's-his-name's soldiers. A short rest was paramount, and no one would find him here.

Lolling his head upon the stones, Kane breathed in fitful gasps, his mind trapped in a black delirium somewhere between waking and dreaming. After a while he saw the destroyed village return once more to its old state. Guttled ruins blossomed into busy shops and bright houses; the weed grown paths became wide streets. Throughout this reborn village hurried its townspeople, most of them occupied with their own business and paying no attention the stranger who reclined in their midst on a swaying litter of velvet.

But there were some who noticed the interloper. These few

gathered about him and gazed at Kane with pale, hungry eyes. And even though Kane half realized that these were ghouls who surrounded him now, it mattered nothing.

Cautiously, like vultures fluttering down upon a dying lion, the ghouls slunk ever closer to Kane. Foul spittle hung from rotten yellow fangs as they reached with anxious paws for their indifferent prey.

"Back!" Her voice lashed them into fearful obedience. "All right, damn you! Get back, I said!" They tumbled backward before her anger.

For a fleeting instant full consciousness returned to Kane. In that dreadful interval he saw before him half a dozen pallid, twisted shapes cowering away from him, driven back by the awful fury of a girl whose strange beauty rivaled that of any his mind could recall.

Only for a startled second did he regain his senses; then came total oblivion. And as he sank into its welcome release, there echoed her joyous words: "This one shall be mine!"

## **II. Beyond the Forest**

"How many days exactly?"

The elderly servant meticulously added five drops of yellow fluid to the wine goblet before answering. "Oh, three days, four days, something like that." Gently he stirred the elixir, taking care

not to spatter his extravagant livery. "What does it matter?"

Kane's temper seethed within him. "I really would like to know how long I've been unconscious," he said with great patience.

"Mmm?" The servant handed him the goblet. Kane's hand shook somewhat as he accepted it, and a few drops flicked upon the rich fur pelts that covered his bed. A slight frown lined his attendant's lean face. "How long indeed. That's original. Trust a fool to come up with a line like 'Where am I?' or 'How long have I been like this?' every damn time."

"Yeah, sure! That's another question I'd like answered," Kane growled, as he sipped the tonic. It burned his throat, without totally masking a nauseously sweet undertaste. Kane paused in alarm, then reflected that his hosts could easily have killed him while in coma, and he gulped the rest of the mixture. "The last thing I remember was..." He groped for memory. "I seem to remember lying in a ruined village in the moonlight. There were ghouls too. A pack of them closing in on me as I lay there. Someone scattered them just as I blacked out for keeps. A woman, I think."

The steward laughed dryly. "That must have been some knock on the head, stranger! You were down in the deserted village, true enough. But it was just a few mangy thieves that my mistress chased off when they found you. Lucky for you she and her men were late in returning from the hunt. Beat up as you were, you wouldn't have lasted the night in the open." He accepted the empty goblet and gingerly placed the delicate vessel on a silver tray.

Kane shrugged and sat up. The elixir was potent. Already his head felt clearer. "So where am I now?" he asked.

"Why in Altbur Keep!" laughed the steward. "Didn't you see the castle as you came up?"

"The only 'castle' I can recall passing near," mused I Kane with a frown, "was an empty heap of mossy stones atop the hill above the village."

"Heap of mossy stones?! Does this place really look like that to you, now?" The steward's airy gesture included the rich tapestries of the walls, the lavish furnishings of the room. "Well, I'll grant you maybe Altbur isn't as magnificent as in my ancestors' days, but still 'a heap of mossy stones'? Really!" He chuckled. "Jasseartion's boys must have really given you a knock on that thick skull!"

Kane's eyes flashed dangerously, but the servant only laughed again. "Oh, thought we couldn't guess who you were then? Seriously, how stupid do you take us to be! Sure we know about that ambush. Oh, don't get edgy now. We're no friends of Jasseartion—I promise you that! No sir, my mistress is surely no friend of that line of opportunistic bandits! Not quite! His ancestors ravaged this area, you know. No friends here, you can be certain! My mistress even took you under her protection out of spite. Just thank your gods that she didn't mistake you for one of Jasseartion's soldiers!"

"Who is your mistress? And when can I offer my gratitude for her protection?" Kane questioned.

"Her name is Naichoryss, if that means anything to you. And she'll accept your courtesy when the time comes. Until then just think about regaining your strength—although you seem to be doing that uncommonly fast, as it is." He stiffly recovered his tray and stepped for the door.

Kane called after him: "And how about you, steward? Do you have a name?"

"Now I haven't asked yours," was the reply.

Kane bit his lip in annoyance and swung his feet to the floor.

### **III. Altbur Keep**

If you looked just so, Kane decided, you could almost see where the summer heat faded out against the chill of Altbur Keep. Maybe just a trick of the fading sunlight, but there was almost a perceptible aura formed where shimmer was blotted into haze. He shivered on his perch atop the battlements and drew his cloak more closely about him. His own clothes had vanished along with his weapons, he had discovered on regaining consciousness, but his still unseen hostess had given him far better apparel in their place.

No, he had no complaints in regard to his treatment. Superb apartments, excellent food and drink, and a staff of servants who gave him utmost attention. But still, his weapons had not been left him. And although he was free to roam the fortress at will, the gates of Altbur Keep were politely, emphatically locked to him. Well, if you were a prisoner, this was the way to do it.

Kane leaned out recklessly from the battlement and considered the castle walls. A sheer drop and easily killing height. Still there were several promising spots which should offer enough concealment. A matter of securing sufficient rope then. And no one actually guarded him, although Kane was aware that there were few times when someone was not unobtrusively going about his own business from a spot where an eye could be kept on the guest's movements. At the moment, in the shadow of a nearby watchtower a kitchen maid was in close embrace with a disturbingly grubby stable hand.

All in all a not overly difficult place to slip out of, if need arose; Kane had considerable confidence in his ability here. And maybe he was too uneasy—"paranoid" in the language of an obscure treatise he had read through long ago. His life had been saved quite likely, his treatment here was first rate, and it was essential that he have a safe place to hide until he was ready to escape Chrosanthe. Some caution in taking in a strange mercenary was altogether natural. And there had been no difficult questions to answer.

Yet Kane continued to be uneasy, and he had lived far too long to discount the forebodings of his inner mind. Of course he had little way of knowing just how much of what he had seen in his delirium had been real. From the castle the village looked forlorn, deserted—but not the sinister tangle of ruins seen that night. Altbur Keep seemed a bit empty and forgotten by the world—again it certainly was not the ruined fortress Kane had envisioned it to be. Should it be here at all though—in a region ill famed and by common knowledge laid waste for two centuries? Kane knew it was not extraordinary to find the dying embers of a once proud and glorious family that continued to dwell amidst the ruins of their ancient power and grandeur.

Other things lived in ruins too.

Silence. Chill. Events within the castle somehow frozen moments of time, disremembered fragments of a dream strangely caught up again, And somewhere just beyond the power of recognition a hint of mustiness—flawing the representation as a mirror image tarnished with antiquity. Vague hints that in some manner the world of Altbur Keep was but a mirage.

Kane sensed it as he walked through its hallways. To be sure it was nothing concrete. Perhaps only for a moment a shadow would seem out of place, or a detail of a tapestry subtly altered. In the servants Kane thought it was most apparent. Almost as if they were actors in a grotesque play. To perfection did each one

perform his role; no detail, no minor touch had been neglected in the characterization. Kane scowled at the impassioned couple in the shadows and wondered how often the scene had been rehearsed. Perfect servants, yet it seemed a perfection born of repetition. Polished as the hundredth performance of a popular drama—equally as brittle and unreal. Still there was nothing Kane could pin down to precision.

He wondered if the performance continued as he passed from one particular area to another, or whether the players called a break without their audience.

And his hostess. The mistress of Altbur Keep. Naichoryss. Where was she then? His questions received only politely noncommittal answers from her servants. Naichoryss. Fabrication? A character held in reserve for later in the drama? Or was she the author of the masquerade, who remained behind the curtains to watch the audience response? Naichoryss. Mistress of Altbur Keep, or Mistress of the Mirage?

Kane slid from the parapet. It was time he found out.

## **IV. Mistress of Altbur Keep**

"This way, sir, if you please."

Kane turned to discover his acquaintance, the steward, had slipped up behind him unnoticed. That was a nice touch: seen and not heard. Withered creep was lurking behind a tapestry doubtless. Bastard could probably slide under a fresco. "This

way?"

"Certainly. My mistress," he prompted. "Naichoryss has had prepared a small dinner in her chambers. She asks that you join her now."

That simple then. "So she's at last decided to have a look at her discovery."

The steward shrugged and quoted:

A woman's mind, friend Eistenallis,  
Is a mystery;  
Whose unfathomable depths,  
Rival the uncharted currents of a god's whimsey.

"Curious that your quotation is that of Halmonis as he led Eistenallis to a rendezvous from which the courtier failed to return," remarked Kane, as he followed his guide.

"Ah! You know the work of Ganbromi then? A literate mercenary!"

"I knew Ganbromi," Kane muttered, hoping he would not provoke a further outburst of erudition from the supercilious prig.

"Here we are then," the steward concluded and rapped against a brassbound door. Seeming to hear acknowledgment from within, he swung it open and stepped aside, his expression correctly impassive.

Stepping within, Kane was received by two smiling maids dressed in identical garments of soft leather and interlocking brass rings. Silently they opened a second door and invited him to enter.

She rose from her couch to greet him as he pushed through the curtained entrance; her red lips parted, secretly smiling upon tiny

white teeth. "I am Naichoryss." Her voice came clear and cold—distant as in a dream. "I welcome you to Altbur Keep." A long white arm stirred from the black folds of her gown and curved towards a couch across the low table from her own. "Please be seated now, and tell me of yourself. It is so seldom that I receive visitors anymore." A slight gesture to her maids, then she returned to her couch with the quiet grace of a shadow.

Kane easily stretched his massive frame upon the indicated couch, watching as the serving maid filled his chalice with wine as clear and red as the rubies of the vessel's rim.

"My name is Kane," he began. There seemed no point in subterfuge under the circumstances, and he was too proud to be taken as a common mercenary amidst such splendour.

Naichoryss smiled. Thin lips poised over the red wine dark eyes reflected its crimson, wave on wave of long black tresses wreathed a pale, delicate face, features finely chiseled. A study of eerie beauty, cold and aloof as an exquisitely carved masterpiece of gemset ivory and jet.

"Kane." Her lips caressed the sound. "A cruel name, I think. Not a common one." The light in her eyes was a mocking glitter. And Kane knew that Naichoryss had been aware all along of his identity.

Kane was not a man easily mistaken for another. His red hair and fair complexion, his powerful bearlike frame set him apart from the native Chrosanthians in a region where racial features leaned to dark hair and lean wiriness. And his rather coarse features and huge sinewed hands did not make him too exceptional from the mercenaries displaced from the cold lands far to the south. It was his eyes that branded him as an outsider. No man looked into Kane's eyes and forgot them. Cold blue eyes in which lurked the wild gleam of insanity, hellish fires of crazed destruction and bloodshed. The look of death. Eyes of a born

killer. The Mark of Kane.

Kane returned his hostess's amused scrutiny with assumed indifference. "Since it's obvious that even here in Altbur Keep the details are commonly known regarding Jasseartion's quarrel with his lamented half-brother Talyvion, I won't bore you with stale news. As you can understand, it was urgent that I should outdistance Jasseartion's malice as rapidly as feasible. However, I was a little slow. Perhaps an underestimation of the flit's thoroughness, but it is startling to discover steel inside a violet. At any rate, his soldiers didn't recognize me, left me for dead, and I blundered about the forest out of my head until you chanced to find me." He went on to express gratitude for her protection and hospitality.

Her laughter was a symphony of silver flutes and bells; its sound light and merry, but underneath lay a shivery note. "So Kane is the gifted courtier that ladies praise him to be! To turn your own comment, how unusual to find polished graces disguised behind such brutal strength! But then I discover paradoxes at every turn with you, Kane! Arid what vitality! In a matter of days you appear altogether recovered from wounds that should have left you dead or disabled for weeks! I'm delighted now that I had you spared that night in my village!"

"My mind is a blank for that time, I'm afraid," Kane broke in. "Your excellent steward mentioned that there were bandits..."

Naichoryss's slender band waved dismissal. "Bandits? Hardly! A few miserable sneakthieves and poachers who would have slit your throat for your boots. They fled like rats when my hunters and I rode by.

"Please, though! All these formal expressions of introduction and gratitude are so boring! And existence here in Altbur Keep is dull enough without that. You must tell me now of all the fascinating things going on in the outside world, or I'll spend the

whole night yawning. Tell me of those exotic lands your wanderings must have led you through. Dispel my boredom, and you'll remain here until Jasseartion grows old and forgetful!"

The arrangement seemed satisfactory to Kane. The role of dinner partner was one in which he had enjoyed great experience, and an evening of anecdotes would keep his hostess from learning more about her guest than Kane felt she should know. So while Naichoryss's maids bore tray after tray of delicacies across the room, silent but for the jingle of their brass ringlets, Kane entertained the strange mistress of Altbur Keep with curious tales of old battles and intrigue in lands that were almost fabled.

The wine was of ancient vintage; Kane savored its rare and delicate taste with enthusiasm, and watched with high approval as the attentive maid kept his chalice brimming. His mind seemed inflamed with its potency as he talked—so much so that he wondered if the wine contained some subtle drug. Yet his hostess was served from the same vessels, although she both ate and drank only sparingly.

And when the serving girls had taken away the last course and only the wine remained, Naichoryss rose to her feet and beckoned him toward the open balcony. Kane followed her onto the moonlit stones, his movements somewhat heavy from the wine and the magic of her beauty. For a moment they leaned in silence against the parapet, looking out over the valley where cold moonlight etched the ruined village in silver and black. Only a faint wind stirred, lightly rippling her raven hair with its chill breath, so cold, so empty for a summer's night.

Moonlight shone through her smoky gown, making almost luminescent the white skin it half veiled. Kane's throat grew tight with emotion, and his senses grow even more tumultuous. Here was beauty which drew him with a fascination more compelling than any he had yet experienced.

"Aren't you cold?" he began lamely, not trusting himself to an opening less conventional.

Naichoryss turned to him, only just beyond his arm's reach. "Cold? Yes. Yes, I am cold. Not from the night though. It's a far, far deeper cold that I know—one that can be warmed only..."

The moonlight glowed on her sharp white teeth, while the hunger of her eyes matched the invitation of her smile. "I think perhaps you can warm the cold that torments me."

Kane reached then to take her in his arms, but his movements were clumsy and she slipped through his grasp with secret laughter. Dumbly he stared at her, entranced hopelessly as an adolescent bumpkin in the hands of a talented courtesan. Where his fingers had brushed across her flesh they stung as if scorched by ice.

"Not so impetuous, my rough warrior!" she laughed. "This is a moment to be savored! With an eternity of nights before us, would you fall on me like a rutting bear?"

With extreme annoyance Kane fought to control himself. What was this woman's witchery, that it left him all the grace of a horny plowhand? But the desire to possess this strange creature overwhelmed every attempt to restore sophistication to his usually polished manner.

Naichoryss gathered into her arms a lyre-like instrument, cradling it to her breast as she swayed mockingly a few paces from him. "A moment to be savored," she intoned huskily. "Fully. To the last glistening droplet. Shall I sing for you, Kane? Can you contain all that vitality for yet a few moments more?"

His hand shook as he raised the chalice to his lips, and though he did not trust himself to speak, Kane's eyes blazed with the desire that racked his soul.

Almost pensively her fingers slipped across the lyre strings, although Kane sensed that her casualness was altogether assumed. He thought of the seeming disinterest exhibited by a cat when it plays with its prey.

A tune caught her whimsy and she hummed to herself there in the moonlight. And from the moon and the cold and the loneliness and the night itself she wove the fabric of her song.

Come to me, my lover, join me here in the night,  
In the moon's cold, clear light, stand before me,  
And upon my altar of cold stone, offer to me your soul.  
Touch my hand, my lover, feel my flesh like ice—  
Rest your head upon my breast; it is a pillow of soft snow.  
Caress my lips, my lover, taste my frozen breath—  
Look deep into my eyes; they hold the chill of night.  
Then let me take you in my cold embrace,  
Come with me to my world beyond all pain;  
And with my kiss, then shall you know,  
That love's purest expression  
Is in death, is in death.

With languid movement Naichoryss laid aside her lyre and stretched herself. Kane stared at her in utter entrancement. "There! So silent, Kane? I hope my song didn't lull you to sleep." She glided away from him, out of the moonlight and into the broken shadow of her bedchamber.

Kane followed her into the room; his every muscle stiff with tension, his mind in a delirium of wild emotion. "Naichoryss," he whispered hoarsely.

But she put a finger to her lips, and he was silent again. She faced him there beside her bed, and her dark eyes shone with her hunger for him. Then her slim fingers brushed the fastenings of her robe and it fell away from her like mist. A great band of moonlight framed her in the darkness, bathing every curve of her

perfect beauty with new sorcery.

"Do you desire me, Kane?" she asked, laughter now vanished from her voice.

"You know I do!" he answered needlessly.

"And do you give yourself to me now, body and soul, for all the nights of eternity?" Was there still a hint of mockery in her eyes?

And even though Kane had now begun to understand the fate to which he was committing himself, he could not hold back his reply: "I give myself to you."

A flash of wild triumph crossed her face then, and she opened her arms to him. "Come to me now!" she cried joyously.

Kane crushed her in his powerful arms, melting her lithe body against his strength. Deeply they kissed, and the unholy chill of her lips seared the fire of his own. Almost unnoticed he felt the sudden thrust of her sharp fangs locking into position.

With surprising strength her hands tore through the fabric of his shirt, ripping it away from his throat and chest.

He watched dizzily as Naichoryss ended her branding kiss and settled back upon the furs of her bed. Feverishly Kane tossed aside the rest of his clothing, noticing even in his haste the long scratches her nails had slashed across his chest. Her fangs glinted evilly in the moonlight, quite obvious now, but Kane was beyond concern at this point.

Her cold arms pulled him down to her, and they entwined in an embrace of black ecstasy. Kane shuddered as wave upon wave of unendurable pleasure broke over him, and his sensations swirled in an impossible blend of flame and ice, revulsion and delight. He made no protest even when Naichoryss twisted over atop him and broke their kiss to trail her icy lips lower across his body.

When her fangs finally bit into his throat, it was as if the fires within him were suddenly unleashed. An unspeakable vortex of pain and ecstasy engulfed Kane, drowning him as he spun helplessly into its blackness.

## **V. Into the Mirage**

Time became meaningless to him. It was as if all existence had become one endless night. Kane no longer knew the sun, although whether this was because he lay unconscious during the daylight hours, or whether time itself had ceased to move for them, he could not tell.

Reality consisted only of their nights together, and even then Kane could never remember how many times they had lain in dark embrace.

He would awaken. Outside there would still be darkness. Sometimes Kane would feel strong enough to walk about Naichoryss's chambers; other times he felt too weak to do more than drag himself far enough to reach the small dinner of wine and flesh that was set out for him. No sign did he ever see of the castle's servants, although he never ventured beyond her chambers to search. He even lacked the strength or curiosity to determine whether the door was locked; the possibility of escape simply did not occur to him.

When he looked at his reflected face in a mirror, Kane saw how haggard and gaunt he had grown, yet he felt no alarm. Without interest he contemplated the two close set wounds which

made sullen red swellings upon the white flesh of his throat.

His only emotion was that of expectation—of anticipation for the disclosure of strange mysteries and secret pleasures for centuries denied to him. It was as if after an endless period of frustrated yearning, he were to have his every longing now fulfilled—at last to be free to embark upon an eternally desired journey. In a delirium Kane waited there, too weak in spirit and body to feel concern, waiting for death.

She came to him always. Sometimes through the door, sometimes she just seemed to be in the chamber.

In mock concern Naichoryss would comment upon his weakness, insist that he take nourishment, drive him out of his lassitude. Always Kane made the effort to please the mistress of Altbur Keep, drawing failing strength from some hidden reservoirs within him. They would talk together, or Naichoryss might sing. But each time it would end in the same manner. Together they would make love. And when Kane lay spent and exhausted to the point of fainting, he would once more feel the searing kiss of her lips on his throat and know the pain of her hunger—that would drive him once again into darkness.

Sometimes Naichoryss would talk to him about herself, about her plans for him. For the vampire was certain of her prey now, and she knew that knowledge of his fate could not change Kane's powerlessness to escape her spell.

She told him of the fall of Altbur Keep two centuries before in the civil wars of that period, told Kane of how the victors had slaughtered all those within village and castle. On this same bed she had suffered the lust of the victorious troops, until someone had seen fit to strangle her. But violence and hatred were forces too powerful to vanish without legacy. Thus it happened that the mistress of the fallen stranglehold had drawn strength from the curses and the frustrated vengeance of a thousand slain—had

become the focus of energies stronger than death itself. At night she had roamed the shadows of her plundered domain, and the light of dawn had exposed many a bloodless corpse to mark her unholy revenge. And eventually it was terror that drove all men from the region, leaving Naichoryss mistress only of ghoulish-ruined ruins.

Many years had passed. The grandchildren of those on whom she sought revenge grew old and died; the war itself became a hazy fragment of history, its factions and issues now confused even by scholars. The stones of Altbur Keep grew weathered and mossy; most of the ghouls moved on to more propitious lands. Still Naichoryss remained to haunt the forgotten ruins of her realm, preying only upon the animals of the forests or a rare stranger who unwittingly passed through.

It was lonely. Only the undead can know all the loneliness of death without the final rest of the grave.

When she drove off the ghouls that had discovered Kane, Naichoryss had known at once what she would do. Bringing him back to her castle, she had raised Altbur Keep from the dust of centuries to all its former glory. Carefully she had nurtured her treasure while Kane regained his strength. Painstakingly had she ensnared him in her spell. And when she considered him fully recovered, Naichoryss had taken him into her embrace to feed upon his immense vitality,

But death was not to be Kane's fate, this Naichoryss promised. Kane's destiny was to become her eternal consort—to join Naichoryss in the shadow realm of the undead! Slowly therefore was she draining life from him, carefully preparing Kane so that he might in death become as she—a creature of the night. And then together they would be rulers of this ghoulish-ruined wilderness—together they would share the dark and unthinkable pleasures of the undead!

One night it happened that upon awakening Kane was too weak to leave the bed. He lay there, breathing in shallow gasps, his flesh pale and sunken, waiting for her to come to him once more.

Her dark eyes lit with exultation when she found him that last night. "At last!" Naichoryss's cry was as joyous as a bride's on her wedding night. "I had almost begun to believe your vitality an unquenchable spark!"

A note of tenderness crept into her voice then. "This is to be our final night like this, Kane beloved. Only for this last time must you know the pain of mortality—for when you next awaken it will not be from mortal sleep, but the sweet dreamlessness of death. And when you arise from death—then we shall at last be truly together! You and I, Kane—together for eternity!"

Kane smiled almost wistfully as she bent over him. Weakly he tried to speak, but her lips sealed his in silence.

Deeper and deeper burned her kiss. Needles of ice tore at every nerve of Kane's body, chilling his soul with unearthly cold. Cosmic emptiness was reaching through the darkness, engulfing him. Ecstasy and agony together assaulted and overwhelmed his failing senses, the two extremes simultaneously tearing him apart then fusing together to create an intolerable sensation.

Her raven black hair was tangled about his face and smothering him. The weight of her cold body was forcing the wind from his chest. Her insatiable lips were sucking the very life breath from his lungs. He could no longer breathe. He was falling...

## VI. Return

Blackness. Kane drifted endlessly through infinite darkness. Not merely absence of light, but nonexistence of everything—matter, energy, time. Floating in the cosmic gulf between life and death.

Somehow through the darkness there extended a thread, a delicate web of substance that would not permit him to drift outward across the infinite void. A miniscule pull, it exerted upon him across the cons, its force weak and almost extinguished, yet too elemental to flicker away altogether. Life made one final attempt to reach Kane, relentlessly demanding expression of its most primeval instinct.

Centuries past, Kane had left the darkness of the womb, a squirming red creature whose first act of life was to draw squawling breath. And now through cosmic darkness this same instinct summoned him forth.

Kane gasped and opened his eyes. Hard stone walls held him tightly and his eyes saw only more darkness. The air in his lungs was stale and foul with century-old dust. Hoarsely he cried out, throwing his arms and legs in blind panic against the wall that pressed upon him. For an instant it seemed he had not the strength to break free, but then every primitive instinct within him howled in fear and loathing, driving his failing limbs onward with strength that surged forth from stores dormant since birth.

The wall gave under his straining heave and toppled away from

him. Gibbering insanity only a breath away, Kane shot bolt upright in his sarcophagus and gulped down the cool, musty air of the sepulchre.

Kane sat there in the darkness, slowly breathing in the tomb air. As life streamed through his shivering body, his mind once more began to function clearly, rationally—freed from the enchantment that had so long imprisoned it.

He could see somewhat now, for the darkness of the sepulchre was daylight after the blackness that had so nearly claimed him. Kane decided that he must be in the family crypt that lay beneath Altbur Keep, for in the gloom he could discern the cobweb-hung shapes of other stone coffins, some reposing in niches of the wall, others set like his upon pedestals above the floor. With an effort Kane hoisted himself out from the confines of his sarcophagus and fell to the floor. Somehow he found the curiosity to wonder what had happened to the previous tenant, as he lurched across the dustladen stones. His feet encountered a stairway, which he stumbled his way up, following wan threads of sunlight that stole past the door to the crypt. Throwing his shoulder to this door, Kane forced it grudgingly open and staggered through the opening.

The hallway in which he stood was strewn with debris, and late afternoon sunlight shone brightly through collapsed ceiling at its far end. Painfully Kane dragged himself along the corridor to stand in wonder among the ruins to which it led him.

Altbur Keep was a deserted ruin. As Kane wandered through its silent hallways he met only desolation. No servants greeted him; only bats dwelled here now, along with certain wise-faced rats that scurried into hiding at his approach. The fortress walls still loomed solid upon the hilltop, although in places parts of the roof had given way. Signs of the castle's fall could still be seen in sundered gates and a few blackened walls where fires had sprung up. Many of its rich furnishings had been carried away by looters,

although Kane encountered numerous mounds of rotting cloth and wood that indicated the tapestries and furniture of Altbur Keep's ancient magnificence. His own clothing was still the battle worn gear he had had with him, now showing signs of further abuse.

A bit of metal caught the sunlight, and Kane was pleased to discover his weapons stashed in a corner of one of the empty storerooms. Grimly he buckled on the battered sword and dirk, then made his way to the chambers of Naichoryss.

He paused often to regain his strength. His limbs shook and every cell of his body ached with numbing weakness. Nevertheless Kane felt a good deal stronger now than he had for a long while—shaken free of Naichoryss's spell, he ignored the dizziness and fatigue and willed his tortured frame to walk.

The sun was setting when Kane reeled into Naichoryss's chambers. Here too, all lay in dust and decay; yet there was a difference. The floors were not littered with trash and broken debris; here it seemed that the disorder left by the looters had been cleaned away and the room restored to a semblance of its old state. The walls still displayed tattered hangings, moldering rugs covered the stones, furniture reposed in proper order, vases and items that a woman treasures lay within dusty cobweb cocoons about the room. It was as though a loving hand carefully composed these chambers before their centuries of rest.

Kane warily examined the shadow haunted rooms, but no sign of life met his scrutiny. Much of her chambers was as he remembered, aside from the erosion of time—although he noted that many of the costly items which he had seen while he lay here were not present in this tableau. Her bed was still there, but Naichoryss did not lie upon its moldering furnishings as Kane had expected. For that matter, the dust that blanketed it appeared to be undisturbed. He frowned in consternation. Kane had supposed that the vampire would have chosen the bed upon which she had

been slain as her resting place during the hours of daylight. This error was serious; he had wanted to confront Naichoryss once more—this time at his own advantage.

From the balcony Kane saw that twilight was growing deeper. He swore in frustrated anger then, realizing that Naichoryss had doubtless laid his all but lifeless body near her own in the castle crypt. And now he knew that his chances were slim of discovering her resting place before darkness called Naichoryss forth. Wearily he stumbled back into the darkening hallway, intent on reaching the crypt while Altbur's mistress yet slumbered.

He lacked the strength to win a race with nightfall. In a patch of light from the newly risen moon, Naichoryss stood awaiting him. Her beauty had not faded under that rough caress of time which had separated Altbur Keep of her spell from the ruin in which they now met. At least that unearthly beauty was not a trick of the mirage, Kane mused.

Her hungry lips smiled as she held out her white arms in welcome. "So I find you already up and about, Kane. Were you so eager to taste your new existence that you had to rush off without me? Perhaps..."

Her smile melted with distress then as Kane reached her. "Something's wrong!" she cried in horror. "You're still alive! You're not..."

"Yes, something is very wrong!" Kane smiled mirthlessly. "Despite your best efforts to the contrary, there's some little life left within me! Enough to recognize the world of the living once again! Enough so that your sweet invitation to join you in the crypts of Altbur Keep no longer tempts me!"

Her cameo face was a mask of dismay. "I don't understand! It's not possible that a mortal could stand living before me after he

has known my kiss! Drop by drop I had taken from you your vitality. You were too weak then to resist last night as I sucked from your lips the very essence of your life force. It seemed that your body was already growing cold in my arms when I carried you to the crypt before dawn."

Naichoryss broke off pensively. "I laid you in the coffin beside my own. Those two had been set aside so long ago for myself and for the husband whom I was never to meet."

Kane sank onto a window ledge and gazed upon the vampire with brooding eyes, his thoughts hidden beyond their blue depths.

Naichoryss stood in silent contemplation, studying him. Somewhere in the shadows sounded the beat of velvet wings, while in the corner a rat rustled cautiously through dry leaves.

"I think I know now," she mused. "You recovered from your wounds so fast—even the scars are fading. Then it seemed that I would never sap your life force, though I drank of it each night. It was unnatural for a human body to replenish its lifeblood so rapidly. And only an extraordinary vitality could break the spell of my death kiss and fight its way back from the abyss of eternal night.

"The night spirits speak at times of one who bears the name of Kane. One of the first men, they say he is—a man cursed by the gods because he rose in rebellion against his creator, because he was first to bring violence and death to the paradise in which primeval man was nurtured. This Kane was given the curse of immortality—doomed to wander the earth for eternity, never to know peace, but to bring evil and destruction wherever he walked—until he might himself be destroyed by the violence that he had been first to give expression. That men might know him for what he is, Kane was marked with eyes of a killer."

Awe was in her voice. "An immortal body would be quick to heal any wounds that were not immediately fatal. Nor would it show age. Probably it would maintain itself in the exact condition it had known when the curse was pronounced.

"There was something unnatural in you, Kane—I had sensed it all along, but I had chosen to ignore it in my dreams for us. Now I see I was a fool to discount the whispers of the night winds."

Kane shrugged, still silently brooding.

Desperation edged her voice. "Stay with me, Kane beloved!" Naichoryss appealed. "You have only to cease this pointless resistance and surrender to my kiss! Please don't fight to break my enchantment again! Surrender to me just this last time, and then you will awaken to be my lover, my master, for eternity! I swear to you, we shall be lord and lady of Altbur Keep! We shall reign together here until the stars fall spinning into the sea of night! Our love—together in a world without age, without pain!

"Do these ruins oppress you now? Then gaze upon their sublime tranquility through the eyes of the undead! Did you prefer Altbur Keep in its former splendor? Our spells will restore it to all the magnificence in which you have lived these past days! If it is your whim, we can bring our entire realm back to its old glory and reign together in state, while in the outside world kingdoms rise and crumble!"

Laughter. Laughter of bitterness. "A mirage," Kane murmured.

Naichoryss hurried in alarm. "Mirage? The resurrection of Altbur Keep of my youth? Not so, Kane! To you and me it shall be altogether as real as these ruins are to its now! You spent days within the shelter of its ancient walls, attended by servants' long bleached bones, nourished by its food and drink, clothed in the luxuries of past centuries! Wasn't all of that real to you then? Can

you truthfully say in your mind which vision of Altbur Keep is real and which one dream?"

"Reality and dream are often impossible to distinguish," mused Kane. "Philosophers have argued that reality is nothing more than man's personal interpretation of the microcosm in which he moves. Perhaps life then is only a dream from which death will awaken us.

"But you have misunderstood me, Naichoryss. Misunderstood me from the beginning, I think.

"Death. The mystery of death. Is it oblivion or a now adventure? Does it bring peace as so many have claimed? Is it some higher plane of existence? Is it a rebirth? So much has been theorized of death, but so little is known. I've spent years at a time brooding over death. Sometimes I exult in my defiance of death, other times I ache with a yearning to fathom this forbidden mystery. In circles. Pointless circles.

"When I first regained consciousness here, I sensed that something was unreal with Altbur Keep. My curiosity was stimulated and I stayed on, even when I met you and later recognized you for what you are. You see, I could have broken your spell, I think—at least at first. Only I was so curious. Curious to sample death at last for myself.

"And I suppose I came as close as any man can come to knowing death, and yet return to life with that knowledge.

"But I found that death was a mirage. A promise on the horizon. Distant, unattainable. A vision of strange pleasures and mysteries. And once attained, there is only a waste of bare sand.

"Boredom is the nemesis which has stalked me without rest over the centuries. Life, unfortunately, tends to repeat its favorite and dullest patterns with monotonous regularity. Death seemed to me a new adventure—an escape from a world of which I grew

weary ages ago.

"But death—or at least the variety of death in which you so nearly ensnared me—is only another endless waste of tedium. An eternity spent either hidden in a crypt, or else in haunting these forest choked ruins—or in reliving a stagnant dream of the past. The proposal strikes me as a greater boredom than any I have yet encountered!

"And so I found that in death I sought a mirage—only a mirage! It was this realization that sparked my rebellion to death and gave me strength to return to the world of life! This knowledge that now demands that I leave you and the world of Altbur Keep!"

Naichoryss appeared to tremble in the moonlight, her beauty flickering with warring emotions. "I see then that I cannot break your will. Even now you are too strong to succumb to the enchantments that held you earlier."

For a moment rage replaced tragedy in her voice. "If I can not make you my consort, you can yet become my victim! This time I can tear open your soft throat and drink every crimson droplet of blood from your veins! Yes—and leave you a dry hulk for the ghouls to fight over and devour! This has been the fate of all others who have intruded within my realm! You're too weak now to deny me should I desire your life!"

Kane's eyes glowed dangerously; his hand strayed toward swordhilt. "Don't force my hand, Naichoryss!" he snarled. "My stay with you has proven interesting and I bear you no grudge. Interfere with my departure and Altbur Keep will lose its mistress!"

Kane thought for an instant the vampire would hurl herself upon him, but instead Naichoryss chose to sigh. "Perhaps I should. I don't know. One way or another, it would be an

ending."

She drew herself up proudly; an aristocrat does not forget her breeding. "Still I don't believe you'll be quick to forget my kisses, Kane." Her smile was resigned. "Go on and leave me now if your mind is made up! Take your chances getting past the ghouls and Jasseartion's soldiers! Only leave now before... while my hospitality lasts!

"But remember always that I am here in Altbur Keep. And when your existence grows more arduous than you can bear—when memories of my embrace, my kisses torment you in your dreams—remember then that two coffins await in the crypts of Altbur Keep! Remember the peace to be found in one, the love that ties dreaming of you in the other! And then, Kane beloved, come back to me here!"

Kane eased himself from the window ledge. "I'll remember. But don't delude yourself by expecting my return. Altbur Keep taught me something, and I won't travel this one road again."

"Are you certain of that, Kane?" Mockery had returned to her voice now.

"Good-by, Naichoryss," was his answer.

Cautiously Kane picked his way down the slope from the lonely ruins of Altbur Keep. If he avoided the deserted village, there should be little chance of encountering any ghouls in the few hours left before dawn. Then sleep in a tree perhaps during the day. A rabbit or two would do wonders toward improving his condition. Once past the Chrosanthian border... Several possibilities suggested themselves to him.

He paused at the base of the hill to glance back, thinking of the beautiful child of death who walked those forgotten hallways alone. Kane knew full well the agony loneliness could be—understood the pain Naichoryss had felt when he had left

her there alone in the moonlight.

Pain? Can the dead feel pain? Tears from dead eyes would coldly sparkle in the moonlight.