

Springing Tyger, Hidden Wolf

In an instant, you have shaken off the feeling of contented peace that has settled over you this evening, and you face this stranger squarely – outwardly at ease, but inwardly tensed and ready for action. That Kane should make such portentous threats does not speak well of his intentions, but you reflect that this is Exile after all... and perhaps there is more here than meets the eye at first glance. Regardless, you are not one to act rashly – nor allow others to get the drop on you. Your first thought is for the Watchmen – brave lads, but clearly outclassed by this sinister outsider.

“No problems here, my lads,” you say with a calm tone, never taking your eyes from Samuel Kane. “At least, none I cannot deal with. Perhaps it might be best if you were fetch the Watch-Sergeant, and tell Surin Lation of the Guardians while you are at it,” you suggest.

“But sire –“

“That’s an order, lad,” you say with quiet authority. You dislike having to pull rank, but it seems the best way to save lives here. You may have enough trouble on your hands without having to watch for the safety of others. With a wide-eyed stare, the two Watchmen do as they are bidden and hasten away, clearing the few onlookers on the street away from your position.

“Now,” you say with a measured smile to the towering figure. “Let us discuss the matter of Mistress Kane. I sense that despite your words, you bear ill intent towards her, and while I am certain that young lady can look after herself, I am not about to let you harass her needlessly. I have no idea of what ‘token’ you speak of, and I would not divulge it to you even if I knew. Something tells me that Sabrina would not care to take up your offer to join with you, and I am not about to break a trust. If your intentions are so beneficial, why do you not ask her yourself?”

“I shall not ask again, Lawkeeper,” the fellow growls softly, a guttural noise rumbling in his throat. Even as you watch, he seems to add height and muscle to his powerful frame, now standing some three yards tall. Wiry hair sprouts from his face, and upon his bulging biceps, his plaid shirt straining under his rippling chest.

“Then I fear you must back down, sire Kane,” you say with a jovial air that you do not inwardly feel. “For you shall learn nothing from me... Not without a fight, in any case...”

The burly stranger flashes a wicked smile, his mouth now full of sharp fangs.

“You just said the magic words,” he sneers, his body now throbbing with nascent

adrenaline. You sense that he is about to attack in a blur of motion, his muscles straining and surging at the seams... It might make sense to take an adoptive stance and defend yourself, but sometimes the best defence is a good offence. And so you do what your opponent cannot possibly expect, and take the fight to him. Almost to your own surprise, you launch into forward motion, perhaps drawing upon some of the impetuous spirit of Mistress Kane, using your momentum to carry you into a headlong spring. Kane lashes into a savage flurry of blows, but as fast as he is, you are quicker still. Dodging the tearing claws upon his shovel-like hands, you strike him squarely with the 'Tiger Spring', hammering hard into his barrel chest. Under the impact, his knees buckle and he goes down, hard, folding beneath you as you spring over his toppled form. You swiftly recover your balance, glancing back to see that – incredibly – the enraged stranger is clambering to his feet. You struck him hard enough to drop a raging bull, and yet he seems barely winded by your assault.

With a blur of motion, Kane rushes at you, fangs bared and talons reaching out for your throat. In that instance, you are minded of your battle with the Lord of Wolves and his minions, the fallen children of Trorindar. Is Kane such a monstrosity, a wild were? The animalistic rage of his assault seems to confirm this, yet he keeps the bearing of a man, albeit a feral and bestial specimen. With blinding speed and seething rage, he slashes the air; you somersault backwards in defence, and his claws merely catch your robes, unravelling their edge. He bundles on with blind fury, and you skip to a halt, anticipating his charge. You let out a high-pitched kai shout, channelling your energy as you meet his charge with a double-footed kick. The impact jars you backwards but sends Kane staggering, recovering his balance with a snarl of rage. You load in with two high kicks and a stabbing knuckle-punch, but he seems to shrug off your attacks and lashes out with a backhand blow. You roll with the attack, but even a glancing hit makes your head ring, and you taste hot blood upon your lips.

Feinting to the left, you duck his savage lunge and come up close, blasting a volley of hard punches to his face. You get good leverage on your blows, each snapping back his shaggy head and driving the massive brute back across the cobbled stones. Reeling from your attack, Kane snorts a spray of blood from his snout, and wipes his bloody lips.

“You are strong, Lawkeeper... Your spirit is proud, and your aim is true! I will feast well upon your heart, and devour your essence to assimilate your strength!”

Your reply is a roundhouse kick and a stiff-armed body-punch, solid blows that would have pole-axed an armoured charger... yet Kane merely sways and staggers, giving out a throaty laugh, heady with battle-madness. You are beginning to wonder what you need to do to slow him down, let alone stop him – he is absorbing your best shots, and seeming to grow stronger as the fight wears on. Perhaps he truly is related to Sabrina Kane – like his namesake, he seems to have the capacity to soak up whatever horrific punishment you care to dish out.

You take the opportunity to step back and mutter hasty prayers to Corgul, invoking His protection, warding you against your enemies. You decide to push your luck and

concentrate hard, evoking the magic of the Purple Chains of Binding. If you can incapacitate the man called Kane, you might question him later at your leisure. At your fingertips, violet beams of light coalesce into bands of power that go snaking out to entrap the burly figure, who stands waiting at the far end of the street. He chuckles darkly, barking the word of a counterspell – and watches as your magick melts off him harmlessly, like ice on a summer’s day.

“A mystical duel, eh?” he roars, seemingly amused. “As you wish. I tore out the heart of El-Dorad, the dream-speaker of the Forest of Rains, to absorb his power. I have feasted upon the essence of the World Tree in Dak’ron, over the corpse of the High Druid, Avercombie. You are no match for my arts, boy!”

He gestures grandly, and spitting waves of green flames lick out from his fingertips, causing you to leap back or be charred to a crisp. He gives a great howl of exultation, strobing death-lights burning from his hands in concentric rays, spreading outwards. You throw yourself low, rolling and twisting, but one of them catches you a glancing hit. Your flesh sizzles like fat in a skillet, and the acrid stench of burning fills the air. Gritting your teeth hard, you scramble for cover, forcing yourself to bite down on the pain. You duck behind a corner and manage to regain your feet – your flesh is blistered on your flank, but thankfully you can still walk. Kane snarls in annoyance, seemingly disappointed that you managed to survive. Your amulet glows strongly, and you sense that it absorbed the worst of the blast.

“So, you have wardings, eh, jedar? You have not yet seen the greatest of my works... Come, let me show you what I am capable of...”

You hear atonal chanting in a spidery tongue, and realise that he is attempting some kind of enchantment. His sorcery plucks at your mind, but your strong will and protective prayers stave off his assault. He advances in anger, drawing forth a golden-edged blade covered in delicate scarlet runes. The slender longsword seems rather innocuous for such a hulking behemoth, and yet, you know that this weapon is the source of his leeching powers, his ability to absorb the life-essence and powers of those he kills.

You duck back into the shadows, watching, waiting... You study him carefully with ‘Corgul’s Wisdom’ as he presses forward, noting his strengths and weaknesses. His fighting style is basic, even crude – but he is swift like anger, phenomenally strong, and seemingly inured to pain. You dare not underestimate him.

As he rounds the corner, you swallow the pain and leap into a circle-kick, building up torque on the spot. Kane roars and throws up his arm to shield himself – but your blow was not aimed at him at all. Your foot clangs against his sword-hand, knocking the cursed blade from his grip, and sending it skittering across the cobbles. With a roar, he reaches down to grasp you by the collar, claws ripping at your throat. You feel how powerful he truly is, thrashing in his deadly grasp, not letting him get a death-grip on your throat. You scythe an uppercut to his jaw that staggers him, but his hold does not loosen in the slightest. You twist in his grasp, slamming a kick into the underside of his

arm-pit, causing him to teeter alarmingly on one side. Unable to hold on to you, he hurls you with great strength at the opposite wall, and hot lights go off in your head as you impact upon the redbrick surface. You slide down the wall with painful motion, sheer fighting instinct getting you back on your feet. As Kane charges in with a bestial rush, your intuition takes over, and you drop low, catching him by the hip and tossing him into the wall. He rams head-first into the brick, unable to stop his own momentum, and before he can recover, you grab him by the arm and Irish-whip him into a nearby lamp-post. The metal groans and bends under the impact, and Kane emits a loud shriek of pain. Breathing heavily, you gather your wits, and launch yourself like a living missile, slamming both feet into his chest. He careers backwards, smashing headlong into the redbrick wall, which finally gives way under his bulk, coming apart in a shower of dust. From the rubble, the hairy behemoth groans loudly, scrabbling his way back out – his injuries repairing themselves even as you watch.

“You are making me angry, boy!” he roars as he staggers to his feet.

You know that you were wrong to try to match him for strength, when cunning and guile might win through. Looking upwards, you can see the low roof of a blacksmith’s shop - a mere twenty feet up, lower than most of the towering granite structures in New Hope. Gathering your energies, you propel yourself upwards with a mighty leap, landing nimbly on the tiled roof above.

“Coward!” snarls Kane, and leaps up onto a nearby awning, before springing up towards you. He catches the edge of the tiled roof and pulls himself up with muttered curses. You are no coward, but you sense that your superior agility and balance will serve you better here, where Kane’s bulk will count against him. He snarls as he grasps a loose tile, hefting it in his hand as it glows with ungodly power. He hurls this towards you with deadly intent, and you dodge nimbly aside – the glowing missile striking the overlaid roof and showering the street with falling tiles.

You let him scramble towards you, setting your feet – and then duck low, hitting him squarely twice in the chest. Your elbow ploughs into his bloody face, and as he stumbles, the tiles come loose beneath his feet. With all your strength, you hurl him backwards, shoving him off the roof. He falls like a stone, slamming hard into the cobbled streets below. An ordinary man would have broken his neck, but like a speared boar, Kane struggles to regain his feet, ignoring the blood pooling beneath him. You feel some modicum of respect for your adversary despite his undoubted malevolence – but cannot let pity rule your actions in battle. You suck in precious air and stand on the edge of the building, preparing yourself. And then, you launch yourself with a kai shout, descending like a thunderbolt from a clear sky. With all the impact of your Down Strike, you smash into Kane just as he regains his feet, knocking him back to the granite street with bone-crunching impact.

It takes a moment to regain your wits, but as you look over at the fallen form of Kane, he lies silent and still, stretched out in the road. Is it over? You groan as you watch him stir, his shattered bones repairing as you look. You force your weary body to stand – then spin

around as you hear the creak of a door, and a small voice call out.

“Is the Bad Man deaded?”

You look across to see a young child, aged about seven, peering fearfully from behind a nearby door. You hear a shriek from her mother as she tries to gather up the girl, and you shout for her to get back inside. Kane sits up, glaring about him, implacable hatred written on his hairy face. In one smooth motion, he seizes a brick slate that lies beside him, and launches it like a discus at the open doorway. It shatters against the wall, and the mother squeals as she dives for cover, the child tearing free and running fearfully across the street. You look up to see lights burning in the nearby windows – it seems your fight has attracted an audience...

Kane leaps to his feet and gives a howl of fury. He seizes the metal struts of the nearby awning, tearing it off as if it were made of cardboard, and raises the sheared end like a spear. You prepare to dodge, but he sees the cowering child at the same time you do, and snarls as he flips the metal shaft towards her... You break into a sprint, hurtling towards her, and reach her an instant before the missile does, knocking her into the shadowed alleyway behind a water-trough. She coughs and rises up as you tell her to keep her head down, and an instant later you hear a low roar of detonation, and a glimmering light punctures the side of the trough, hurling the wooden container high into the air. You are drenched, but that is the least of your troubles. You are now exposed, and cannot leave the child in danger. Kane stands a little way off, the tip of his recovered blade glimmering with power. He gloats as he gestures, lightning springing up from his hands, and arcing towards you in a blue flash. You cannot leave the girl unprotected, nor take evasive action, so you drop to one knee, raising your gauntlets crossed in front of your face, ready to absorb the blast. The electrical charge strikes you squarely, and you lurch under the stinging surge of pain that lashes through you. Your flesh sizzles and your hair stands on end, and for a moment you black out, forcing yourself to sit up with shaking limbs.

You do not have to feign injury as Kane strides over with grim purpose, and grinds his teeth with blood-lust. The girl clings on to your arm and whimpers in terror.

“Enough,” you say, your voice a tight rasp. “Spare the girl... I will tell you what you want to know. Sabrina Kane’s talisman is...”

Kane stops despite himself to listen – then snarls as you spring to your feet with a final burst of effort. He lunges with more savagery than accuracy, and you duck low, noting – like Sabrina – that he has left himself open... Gathering all your strength, all of your mystical energies, your fist burns with white fire as you slam it into his ribcage. You hear bones splinter and organs burst, and Kane staggers like a Fireday-night drunk before crashing like a felled oak.

“You... got... lucky...” he wheezes, and to your astonishment, he seems to collapse in upon himself, leaving only a torn and empty film of flesh behind him... With surprise and disgust, you examine the peeling residue, not unlike a snake’s shed skin.

The blacksmith and his wife rush out to you, showering you with thanks, and you gratefully return their wayward daughter into their arms.

“Thank you... I’m fine...” you insist. “Constable Frica... will take your statements in the morning...”

You see a number of figures hurry up to you from both ends of the street, the Watch-Captain with an entourage of Guardians.

“We sealed off the street so he couldn’t escape,” declares the Captain, a veteran greybeard named Saroth. “Are you well, sire? Is he dead, then?”

“Yes, I shall live,” you repeat. “And let us hope that he is gone for good... although somehow I don’t think we’re that fortunate. I want you to issue flyers and distribute them about the city. Make certain that you state this fellow is considered highly dangerous, and is not to be approached under any circumstances...”

Weakly, you get to your feet, realising that your wet body is a mass of sores, bruises and aches, and you really should get some rest – if not some healing also. But you are unwilling to let the matter pass while Miss Kane may be in danger. You gather up the shed skin, wrapping it in linen cloth and placing it in a carrying bag given to you by the Watchmen. You hail a carriage at the Guardian Hall, heading off into the North District where Sabrina Kane said she would be staying. The ‘Governor’s Head’ turns out to be a rather exclusive, upmarket tavern near the marina front, catering mostly to well-to-do merchants and travellers who prefer luxury and quiet. The new tavern sign on the exterior depicts a bust of the newly-elected Governess, Lady Nichola Elhurst-Rockingham, her features both beautiful and regally aloof. Within, the interior is as cultured and well-upholstered as you expected, with fresh paint on the walls, mahogany furniture and thick carpets underfoot. For some reason, it strikes you as an odd place to find the earthy Miss Kane – until you spot her across the empty taproom, in rather intimate liaison with the curvaceous barmaid. The blonde girl is about Frica’s age, a bosomy rose in a tight blouse with her fair hair piled up on her head.

“Don’t look now, it’s the Scales,” she pouts as you enter, looking at your torn appearance with distaste. “What’ve you done now, Sab?”

“No, this one’s clean – I met him earlier today,” the moon-maid drawls, raising her eyebrows at your battered state. “Hells, d’you pick a fight with an army or somethin’?”

“A one-man army, perhaps,” you admit. “By the name of Samuel Kane.”

“Oh, shit,” she exclaims, her eyes wide.

“Hey mister, we have a dress-code here, law or not,” raps the barmaid tersely.

“Stow it, Aly,” says Sabrina curtly. “I’m gonna have to take a rain-check. This is serious...”

The other girl pouts and moves off behind the bar, while Sabrina pours herself a whisky, and one for you also.

“Look like you need it, lawman,” she comments.

“Well, you should see the other fellow,” you jest weakly, showing her the shed skin.

“Yeah... How does he do that?” she says incredulously. “That’s some real bad mojo. I’ve only seen him do it once, back at that shitty little village outside of Larbis. Me an’ Blondie an’ Fatima almost aced him, but he just... shrivelled up like that...” She looks grimly serious for a moment.

“Look Siggie, this guy scares me. An’ that puts him in an exclusive club of one. We tangled again when I was helpin’ that gypsy-boy, Finn... an’ he damned near kicked my ass with his magick. That disturbs me. An’ all that bullshit he’s peddlin’ about me bein’ his protégé? That ain’t true. Look, I grew up in Bannick – I’m from good middle-class merchant stock. I’m an only child, my folks were decent but fucking dull, an’ I spent my whole youth rebelling against all that. Psycho-boy isn’t my dad, my uncle, my long-lost cousin or anything like that, I swear. He’s as crazy as a Juno bug and I don’t know what he wants with me.”

When you ask whether or not a ‘mere scholar’ can be of assistance, she looks at you quizzically.

“You’re a Lawkeeper, right? I figure some of you types have knowledge-style magick... Well, I have a little myself. Why don’t I get my stuff, an’ we’ll see what we can cook up on the preacher-man? I’ll need my ritual gear. And by the way, you look like shit. Drink this – it’s marjoram, it won’t hurt you, but you’ll feel a whole lot better...”

She places a small bottle of herbal infusion on the bar, and you swig it down in one, grimacing at the strong leafy taste, not unlike liquid stinging-nettles. Nonetheless, she is as good as her word, and slowly, you feel your wounds begin to knit. As you wait for her to return, you try to clear your head, and wonder what your next move should be...