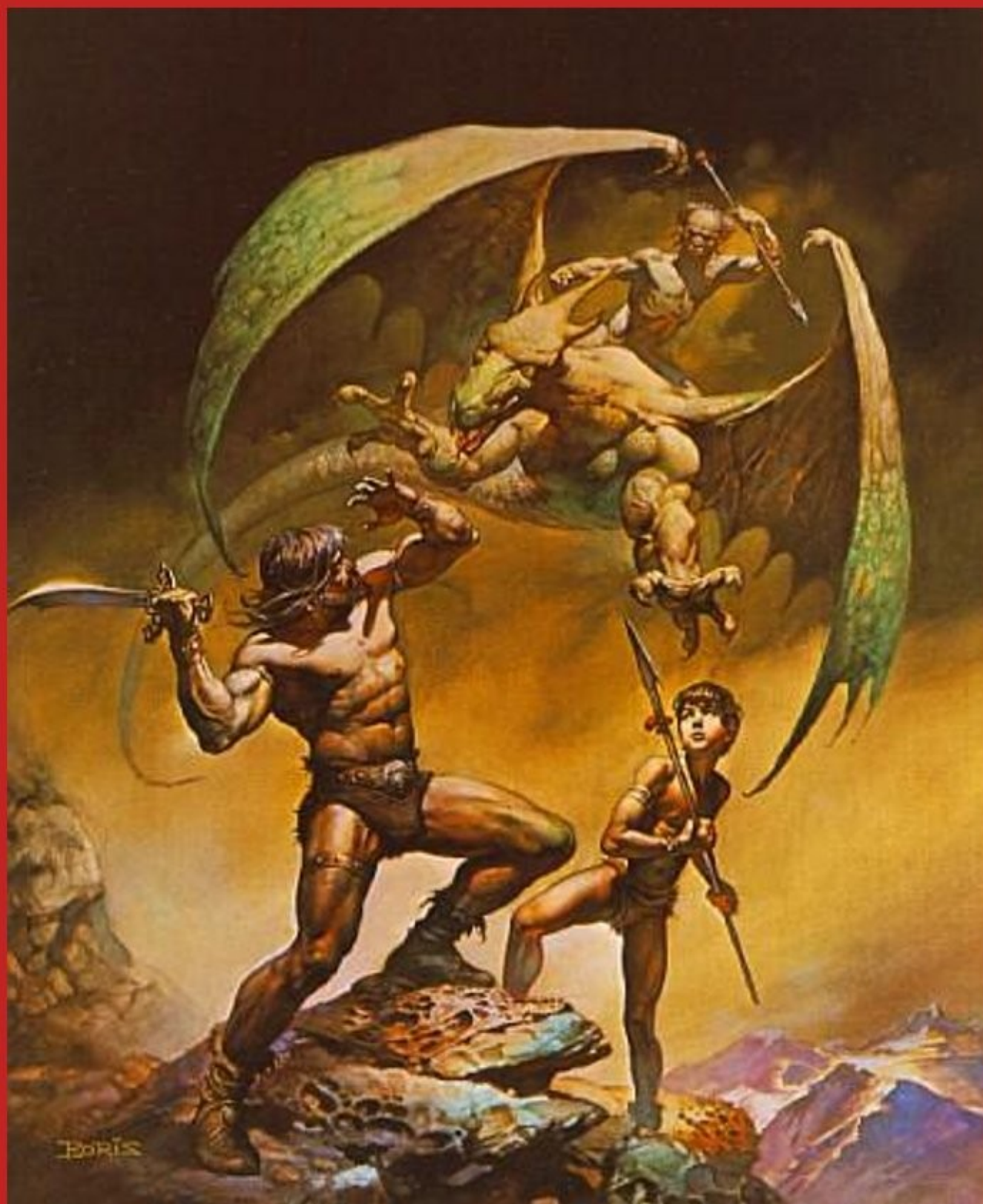


II

# CONAN

## OF AQUILONIA





BORIS



# CONAN OF AQUILONIA

By

**L. Sprague DeCamp and Lin Carter**

DIGITAL EDITION HITMAN66

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# INTRODUCTION

Of all the stalwart heroes of heroic fantasy, the most vigorous, virile, brawny, and mettlesome is Conan the Cimmerian. Conan was the invention of Robert E. Howard (1906-36), born in Peaster, Texas, and for nearly all his life a resident of Cross Plains, in the center of Texas. During his last decade, Howard turned out a large volume of what was called "pulp fiction"—sport, detective, western, historical, science-fiction, fantasy, weird, and ghost stories. At thirty, he ended a promising literary career by suicide. Howard is one of eight writers of imaginative fiction of whose books more than a million copies have been sold—but not, alas, during his lifetime.

Howard was a natural storyteller, whose narratives are unmatched for vivid, gripping, headlong action. His heroes—King Kull, Conan, Solomon Kane—are larger than life: men of mighty thews, hot passions, and indomitable will, who dominate the stories through which they stride. They are the polar opposite of the anti-hero of recent popularity.

Howard wrote several series of heroic fantasies (also called swordplay-and-sorcery stories), most of them published in *Weird Tales*. This magazine ran from 1923 to 1953 and in Howard's time was the only outlet for fantasy. Of these stories, the longest and most popular series comprised the Conan tales. Eighteen Conan stories, from a 3,000-word short story to a 66,000-word novel, were published in Howard's lifetime.

Eight other stories, from complete manuscripts to mere fragments and outlines, have been found among Howard's papers since 1950. As one of the discoverers, I have edited some unpublished Conan stories for publication and rewritten four of Howard's unpublished adventure stories as Conan stories. My colleague Lin Carter and I have, singly and jointly, completed the incomplete Conan stories and fragments. In addition, my colleagues Bjorn Nyberg and Lin Carter and I have written a number of original Conan stories to fill the gaps in the saga, as we think Howard might have done had he lived longer.

Readers who wish to know more about Conan, Howard, and heroic fantasy are referred to the other Conan books listed, especially to my introduction to the volume *Conan*. Of the works by Howard and other writers of heroic fantasy there listed, which ones are currently available can only be learned by inquiry.

There is also a periodical dealing with such matters; *Amra*, published by George H. Scithers, Box 8243, Philadelphia, Pa., 19101. This is the organ of the Hyborian Legion, a loose group of admirers of heroic fantasy and of the Conan stories in particular. Subscription to *Amra* makes one a Hyborian Legionnaire. Three books of articles, poems, and other contributions to *Amra* have been published by Jack L. Chalker, 5111 Liberty Heights Av., Baltimore, Md., 21207: *The Conan Reader*, *The Conan Swordbook*, and *The Conan Grimoire*. The last of these, edited by Scithers and myself, is still in print at the time of writing.

According to Howard and his posthumous collaborators, Conan lived, loved, and fought about twelve thousand years ago, eight thousand years after the sinking of Atlantis and seven thousand years before the beginnings of recorded history. In this time, by Howard's calculations, the western parts of the main continent were occupied by the Hyborian kingdoms. These were a galaxy of states set up three thousand years earlier by northern invaders, the Hyborians, on the ruins of the evil empire of Acheron. South of the Hyborian kingdoms lay the quarreling city-states of Shem. Beyond Shem slumbered the ancient, sinister kingdom of Stygia, the rival and partner of Cheron in the days, of the latter's bloodstained glory. Further south yet, beyond deserts and veldts, were barbarian black kingdoms.

North of the Hyborians lay the barbarian lands of Cimmeria, Hyperborea, Vanaheim, and Asgard. West, along the ocean, were the fierce Picts. To the east glittered the Hyrkanian kingdoms, of which the mightiest was Turan.

Conan was a gigantic barbarian adventurer who roistered, brawled, and battled his way across half the prehistoric world. The son of a blacksmith in the bleak, backward northern land of Cimmeria, he waded through rivers of blood to overcome foes both natural and supernatural, to rise at last, at about the age of forty-one, to the kingship of Aquilonia, the mightiest Hyborian kingdom.

Matured and sobered by responsibility, Conan put down plots at home and invasions from abroad. Previously a great womanizer, he took a legitimate queen and settled down happily to rear a brood of offspring. Of these, the eldest was a son, also named Conan but usually known by his nickname of "Conn."

This story deals with the adventures of Conan and Conn between Conan the Avenger, in which Conan recovered his queen of a year from the sorcerer Yah Chieng. and Conan of the Isles, in which the aging monarch abdicated his throne to set out for one last grand adventure in the unknown West. At the time of the present stories, Conan is nearing sixty. Save for the scars of many brawls and battles, which crisscross his mighty frame, one would take him for a much younger man. True, his square-cut mane of coarse, black, straight hair and the fierce black mustache, which he has assumed in deference to Aquilonian fashions, show traces of gray and his skin is becoming leathery. But while he is a little stiffer and slower than in his long-past youth, the strength of his massive thews is still that of two ordinary men.

# THE WITCH OF THE MISTS

## ONE: The Thing That Fled

The sun, hidden by the heavy overcast, was nearing the western horizon. Above the clearing, the clouded sky hung like a rumpled blanket of dingy wool. Clammy tendrils of vapor slithered like wandering ghosts between the wet black tree trunks. Drizzle from the recent rain pattered upon the drifts of fallen autumn leaves, whose bright scarlet, gold, and bronze were fading along with the light.

With a muffled thudding of hoofs, a creak of leather, and a clank of accouterments, a great black stallion burst into the gloom-shrouded mead. Fog boiled up before his plunging hoofs and parted to reveal a broad-shouldered giant on the huge horse's back, his powerful legs clamped about the beast's barrel. The man was no longer young, for Time had touched with gray the square-cut black mane and the heavy black mustache that swept fiercely out from either side of his grim, tight-lipped mouth. Years had cut deep lines about his jaw. His dark, heavy-featured, square-jawed face and thickly corded forearms showed the seams and scars of many brawls and battles, but his firm seat in the saddle and alert, brisk bearing belied his years.

For a long moment, the huge man sat motionless on the panting, lathered stallion. From under the brim of a sweat-stained forester's felt hat, he raked the foggy clearing with a searching gaze and muttered a sulfurous oath.

Had any eye observed him, the watcher might well have mistaken the swarthy giant for some woodland brigand—until he noticed that the heavy broadsword at his side bore in its pommel a jewel worth a knight's ransom, and the hunting horn that hung over his back was of ivory decorated with gold and silver filigree. He was, in fact, the king of Aquilonia, unchallenged ruler of the wealthiest and most powerful realm of the West. His name was Conan.

Again he scanned the mist-cloaked clearing with his fiery gaze. In the dimming light not even he could read the signs of recent hoof prints in the wet tangle of grasses, even though twigs were broken and fallen leaves disarranged.

Conan tugged at the sling of the horn and raised the instrument to his lips to blow the reheat, when the sound of hoofbeats came to his ears. Presently a gray mare shouldered through the bushes that ringed the clearing. A man of mature years but younger than Conan, with glossy black hair and flashing black eyes in a swarthy visage, rode out of the forest and saluted the king with easy familiarity.

At the first snap of a twig, Conan's hand had instinctively flashed to his hilt. Although he had no reason to fear ill will in this great, gloomy forest northeast of Tanasul, the habits of a lifetime were not easily broken. Then, seeing that the new-comer was one of his oldest comrades and staunchest supporters, he relaxed a trifle.

The younger man spoke:

"No sign of the prince back along the trail, sire. It's possible the lad has ridden ahead on the trail of the white stag?"

"'Tis more than possible, Prospero," growled Conan. "The foolish cub had inherited more than his share of his sire's thickheadedness. 'Twill serve him right if he's benighted in the woods, especially if the damned rains begin again!"

Prospero, the Poitanian general of Conan's armies, politely masked a grin. The burly Cimmerian adventurer had risen, by chance or fate or some wild whim of his northland god, to the throne of the most brilliant and sophisticated kingdom of the West. He still had the explosive temper and unruly ways of his primitive people; and his son, the missing Prince Conn, was growing into the very image of his father. The boy had the same surly, grim-jawed face, coarse black hair, swelling thews—and the same reckless contempt of danger.

"Shall I summon the rest of the party, sire?" said Prospero. "'Twere not good to let the heir to the throne be lost in the woods overnight. We can spread out, sounding our horns ..."

Conan considered, chewing his mustache. About them stretched the gloomy forests of eastern Gunderland. Few knew the paths of these untamed woods. From the look of the clouds, the nightly rains of an early fall would soon be upon them, drenching the primeval wilderness with a cold, relentless downpour. Then the king laughed shortly. "Forget it, man! We'll account this part of the lad's education. If he be of the stuff of kings, a slight wetting and a sleepless night will hurt him little and may teach him something. Why, when I was the cub's age, many were the black nights I spent on the naked fells and in the wooded draws of the Cimmerian hills, under the glitter of the stars. Let's back to camp. We lost the stag, but we have the boar, and those skins of the good red wine of Poitain will go well with roast pork. I am nigh starved!"

Hours later, his belly filled and his spirits lifted by many a draft of wine, Conan sprawled before a snapping fire in the rude camp. Wrapped in a pile of skins, somewhat the worse for wine, the stout Guilaime, baron of Imirus, snored lustily. A few huntsmen and courtiers, wearied from a hard day of hunting, had also taken to their rough beds. A few yet lingered beside the steaming fire.

The clouds had broken, and a wintry moon, nearly full, glared whitely down through scattering mists. The rains had not begun again, and with the sky's clearing had come a brisk, cold wind, tearing autumnal leaves from their branches.

Wine had loosened the King's tongue, so that he held forth, his face brooding and flushed in the flicker of firelight. Bawdy jests and anecdotes from his long career of wild adventure poured from him. But Prospero noticed that, from time to time, Conan broke off, silencing the others with a lifted hand, to listen for distant hoofbeats or to probe the darkness of the gloomy forests with keen glances from his deep-set eyes of volcanic blue. Conan was plainly more worried over Prince Conn's failure to return than his words suggested. It was all very well to shrug it off, saying the experience would do the half-grown boy some good. But to pretend indifference, when the twelve-year-old lad might be lying under a wet bush with a broken leg amidst the black night, was another matter.

Prospero reflected that Conan might be feeling the pangs of guilt—a rare thing for the wild, brawling, half-civilized Cimmerian warrior-king. The hunting trip into northern Gunderland had been Conan's idea. His queen, Zenobia, had fallen ill after long labor giving birth to their third child, a daughter. During the slow months of her recovery, Conan had been with her as much of the time as he could afford to take from his royal duties. Feeling neglected, the boy had become surly and withdrawn. Now that Zenobia had regained much of her strength and Death had seemingly withdrawn his dark wings from the palace, Conan had suggested a few weeks of camping and hunting together, hoping to find a new closeness to his son.

And now the headstrong boy, wild with the excitement of his first grown-up hunt, had ridden off alone into the gathering darkness of the unknown forest in crazy pursuit of the elusive snow-white stag they had vainly chased for hours.

As the sky cleared, revealing the glittering stars, the rising wind whined in the boughs and dry leaves rustled as if to the tread of stealthy feet. Conan again broke off amidst a wild tale of sorcery and pirate life to search the gloom with probing eyes. The great Gunderland wood was not the safest place, even in this turbulent age. Bison and aurochs, wild boar, brown bear, and gray wolf stalked the woodland paths. And there lurked another potential enemy as well: the most cunning and treacherous of all foes—man. For rogues, thieves, and renegades took to the wilds when city life became too dangerous for them.

Snarling an oath, the king came to his feet, doffing his black cloak and tossing it on his pile of duffel.

"Call me woman-hearted if you dare, you bastards," he growled, "but I'll sit here no longer. With this moon as bright as day, I can follow a trail or I'm a Stygian. Fulk! Saddle up red Ymir for me; the black's winded. You men! Pass the wineskin one last time around and saddle up. Sir Valens! You'll find the torches in the third wagon. Distribute them, and let's forth. I'll not sleep easy till I know my boy is safe."

Swinging astride the big roan, Conan muttered: "That unlicked cub, haring off like a jackass after a stag that could outrun two ponies like his! When I find him, I'll teach him to make me leave a nice warm fire for the cold wet woods!"

A snow-white owl floated across the gibbous moon. Conan choked off his curses with a sudden shiver. A black foreboding swept his barbaric soul. His backward people whispered strange tales of a thing that fled in the night—a were-stag, ghostly white and swift as the winter wind. Pray Crom that this was a beast of normal flesh and blood, and not some uncanny thing from nighted gulfs beyond space and time...



## TWO: The Faceless Men

Young Conn was cold and wet and weary. The insides of his thighs were chafed from hours of hard riding, and he had developed more than a few blisters. He was also conscious of a growling emptiness where his stomach should be. Worst of all, he was lost.

The white stag had floated ahead of him like a ghostly bird, glimmering against the darkness. The elusive brute had come almost within spear-shot a dozen times. Each time that cool caution overcame Conn's excitement the magnificent stag had faltered, proud antlers drooping, as if it had reached the edge of its endurance—and each time the vision of bearing so splendid a prize back to his father had spurred the boy on just a little farther.

The boy reined his panting pony to a halt amidst thick bushes and stared around through the dense gloom. Boughs creaked and leaves whispered above him under the rush of the wind, and foliage blotted out stars and moon alike. He had not the faintest idea of where he was, nor of the direction in which the white stag had led him, except that he knew he had strayed far beyond the bounds his father had set. The boy shivered a little in his leather jerkin. He knew his father's temper; he would be beaten with a heavy belt when he came limping back. The only thing that might mitigate Conan's anger would be for Conn to return triumphant, to throw the great stag at the feet of the king.

Conn shrugged off his fatigue and hunger and set his square jaw with boyish determination. At that instant he bore a striking likeness to his mighty sire: the same tanned, frowning visage framed in straight, coarse black hair; the same smoldering blue eyes, deep chest, and broad shoulders. Only twelve, he looked likely to match his father's towering height when he came of age, for already he was taller than many Aquilonian grown men.

"Up, Marduk!" he said, thumping his heels in the ribs of the black pony. They shouldered through the wet, dripping boughs into a long grassy glade. As they entered the open place, young Conn glimpsed a flash of white against the gloom. The great white stag came floating out of the darkness, entering the clearing ahead of them with an effortless bound. The boy's heart swelled, and the excitement of the hunt made his blood sing. Iron-shod hooves drummed through the swishing grasses. Ahead of them, ghost-white against the wet blackness, the stag cleared fallen tree trunks with graceful leaps and bounded toward the far edge of the glade, with the prince in hot pursuit.

Conn leaned over the pony's neck, one strong brown hand clenching the light javelin. Ahead of him, like a will-o'-the-wisp, the white stag glowed. But a dense wall of trees rose beyond. His heart pounding, Conn knew the stag must slow its pace or go floundering into that barrier.

The next instant, even as he flung back one arm to hurl the javelin, it happened. The stag dissolved into mist—a mist that reformed into a tall, gaunt, human shape clothed in white robes. It was a woman, from the billowing cloud of iron-grey hair that swirled about the bony, calm, expressionless mask of its face.

Terror smote Conn. The pony reared, eyes rolling, and neighed shrilly, then came down and stood motionless, shuddering. Conn stared into the cold, cat-green eyes of the woman-thing before him.

Silence stretched taut between them. In the stillness, Conn was aware of his trembling hands, his thudding heart, the sour taste in his dry mouth. Was this fear? Who was this ghost-woman, to teach fear to the son of Conan the Conqueror?

With a violent effort of will, the boy clamped his quivering fingers about the shaft of the javelin. Ghost, witch, or were-woman—the son of Conan would show no fear!

Eyes of lambent green flame smiled with cold mockery into the boy's imitation of his sire's glare. With one gaunt hand, the woman gestured slowly. Leaves crackled; twigs snapped.

The boy jerked his head around, and his grim expression faltered to see the weird forms that stepped into the clearing from all sides.

They were lean men, gaunt as mummies and of superhuman stature. Taller even than the mighty Conan, many topped seven feet. From throat to wrist and heel they were clad in black garments that fitted as tightly as gloves. Even their heads were hooded in tight black cowls. Their hands were bony, thin, and long-fingered, and they bore curious weapons. These were rods or batons, over two feet long, of sleek, gleaming black wood. The ends of each rod were tipped with spherical knobs of dull, silvery metal. These knobs were slightly smaller than fowl's eggs.

It was their faces that struck into his heart the thrill of superstitious awe. For they had no faces! Beneath the tight-fitting black cowls, their visages were smooth, blank, white ovals.

Few would have blamed the lad if he had fled in fear. But he did not flee. Though only twelve, he was sprung from a savage line of mighty warriors and brave women, and few of his forefathers had faltered in the face of danger or death. His ancestors had faced the terrible giant bear, the dread snow-dragons of the Figlophian mountains, and the rare saber-toothed tiger of the cave country. They had fought these creatures knee-deep in winter snows, while the quivering curtain of the northern lights flickered overhead. In this moment of peril, his barbaric ancestry awoke within the boy.

The woman raised her head and called out a short phrase, in strongly accented Aquilonian: "Yield, boy!"

"Never!" shouted Conn. Yelling the Cimmerian war cry learned from his mighty sire, he couched his javelin like a lance at the nearest of the black-clad faceless ones and spurred his tired pony once more.

No flicker of emotion disturbed the calm old face of the white-clad woman. Before the pony could make more than one weary bound, agonizing pain shot up Conn's arm. He gasped, doubling over in the saddle. The javelin flew from his numb fingers, to thud into the wet grass. One of the black-clad men closing in on him had glided close with magical swiftness. With one bony hand, the man had caught the pony's bridle. With the other, the man had whipped up his slender wooden baton. The ball on one end had stroked the hollow of Conn's elbow. The touch of the rod, wielded with exquisite control, had struck the cluster of nerves under the joint. The pain was blinding.

The black-clad man recovered his stance and whipped back the rod for another blow. But the woman cried out in an unfamiliar tongue. She spoke in a deep, harsh, metallic, sexless voice. The faceless man in black withheld his blow.

But Conn did not yield. With an inarticulate cry, he caught with his left hand at the hilt of the falchion that hung at his hip. Clumsily he dragged it forth and reversed his grip upon it. The black-clad men were all around him now, with skinny hands reaching out from long black arms.

Conn swung backhanded at the nearest. The blade struck the man's long neck and laid open his throat. With a gurgling groan, the tall man folded at the knees and fell face-down in the wet grass.

Conn raked his spurs against the pony's ribs, shouting a command to the beast. The pony reared with a shrill whinny as the other faceless men glided in from all sides. Then it lashed out at them with iron-shod hoofs. Like phantoms, the men evaded the hoofs. One flicked out his rod. The knob struck Conn's wrist with diabolical accuracy, and away went the falchion from his flaccid fingers. Another metal ball on the end of a black rod gently stroked the back of Conn's head. The boy fell from the saddle, a bundle of loose limbs. One man caught him in gaunt, black-clad arms and eased him to the grass, while others brought the pony under control.

The green-eyed woman bent over the unconscious lad.

"Conn, Crown Prince of Aquilonia, heir apparent to the throne of Conan," she said in her harsh voice. She uttered a dry, mirthless laugh. "Thoth-Amon will be pleased."

## **THREE: Runes of Blood**

Conan was hunched over in the saddle, hungrily munching a bit of roast boar, when Euric, the chief huntsman, came to him.

The king straightened wearily, spat out a bit of gristle, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Anything?" he grunted. The old huntsman nodded and held out a curious object.

"This," he said.

Conan eyed it warily. It was an ivory mask, delicately carved to fit closely a long-jawed, narrow-chinned, high-cheekboned human face. The queer thing about it was that it was modeled featurelessly, presenting—except for the eye slits—a blank oval of sleek ivory to the eye. Conan did not like the look of it.

“Hyperborean work,” he spat. “Anything else?”

The old huntsman nodded. “Blood on the grass, the grass itself trampled, hoofmarks of a young pony, and—this.”

The fires in Conan’s eyes dulled and his face sagged. It was the falchion he had given as a gift to Conn, celebrating the latter’s twelfth birthday. The coronet of an Aquilonian prince was etched in the silver of the guard.

“Nothing else?”

“The dogs are sniffing about for a trail now,” said Euric.

Conan nodded heavily. “When they’ve found the track, sound your horn and gather the men,” he growled.

The sun was high; the lank grasses smelled wet; the air was steamy and humid. But again the King of Aquilonia shivered as if an unseen draft of icy air were blowing upon his heart.

The sun was an hour older before they found the corpse. It had been carefully buried at the bottom of a gully, beneath a mound of dead leaves and moist earth. But the eager hounds sniffed it out, baying their deep-chested song to call the huntsmen.

Conan rode down to the bed of the gully to examine the corpse. The body had been stripped. The man had been nearly seven feet tall and gaunt. His skin was white as parchment. His hair, too, was a silky white. His throat had been slashed.

Euric crouched over the dirt-stained corpse, sniffing the blood, dipping his fingers in the wound, and thoughtfully rubbing bloody fingertips together. Conan waited in moody silence. At last the old man rose stiffly, wiping his hands.

“Sometime last night, sire,” he said.

Conan looked the corpse over, his gaze lingering on its long-jawed, narrow-chinned, high-cheekboned face.

The man was a Hyperborean: his lean height, unnatural pallor, and silky, colorless hair told Conan that. Dead cat-green eyes stared up from among the wet dirt and sodden leaves.

“Loose the hounds again, Euric. Prospero! Bid the men be wary. We are being led,” said Conan.

They rode on together.

After a time, the Poitanian general cleared his throat. “You think the mask and falchion were left behind for a purpose, sire?”

“I know it,” Conan growled. “In my bones; the way an old stiff-legged soldier knows when rain is coming. There’s a pack of those white devils ahead somewhere. They have my boy. They are herding us, damn their guts!”

“Into an ambush?” asked Prospero. Conan chewed the idea over in silence, then shook his head.

“I doubt it. We’ve ridden safely through three perfect sites for such a trap in the past hour. No; they have some other purpose in mind. A message, perhaps, waiting for us up the trail.”

Prospero considered this. “Maybe they are holding the Prince for ransom.”

“Or for bait,” said Conan, his eyes blazing like those of an angry beast. “I was a captive in Hyperborea once. What I suffered at their hands gave me no cause to love those bony devils; and what I did there, ere I took my leave of their hospitality, gave them little cause to love me!”

“What means the ivory mask?”

Conan spat and took a swig of lukewarm wine. “It’s a shadowy land of devils. Dead and barren, cloaked ever in clammy mists, ruled by naked, grinning fear. A weird cult of black-clad wizard-assassins hold power through the terror of their uncanny arts. They kill without a mark and fight only with wooden rods, tipped with balls of a strange rare, gray, heavy metal called platinum, common in their land. An old woman is their priestess-queen; they think her the incarnation of their death goddess. They who serve in her shadowy legions of skulking killers undergo strange mortification of body, mind, and will. The masks are an example of their fanaticism. They are the deadliest fighters in the world; blind faith in their devil-gods makes them immune to fear and pain.”

They rode forward without further words. In the minds of both men was a dreadful picture—a helpless boy, captive in a land of fanatical death-worshippers whose witch-queen had for years nursed a burning hatred of Conan.

Towards early afternoon, the trees thinned out as the forests of eastern Gunderland gave way to chalk moors overgrown with straggling patches of heather and bracken. They were near the limits of Conan’s realm. Not far beyond lay the place where the frontiers of Aquilonia, Cimmeria, the Border Kingdom, and Nemedra met.

The sky was overcast, and there was a bite to the air. Wind ruffled the purple heather in chill, sudden gusts. The sun was a gray disk, weak and ineffectual. Birds cawed hoarsely, far on the dim moors. It was a grim, bleak land of desolation.

Conan rode in front. Suddenly he drew up his weary roan, flinging up one arm to halt his company. Then he sat slumped in the saddle, staring grimly at the thing that blocked their path. In ones and twos the men behind dismounted and came forward to stand about him, staring.

It was a light willow-wood javelin, such as a young boy might select for hunting a stag. The point was buried deep in the bracken. The haft of the spear thrust straight up into the air. Wrapped about it was a bit of white parchment.

Euric unfastened the parchment with deft fingers and handed it up to the King where he sat his roan, eyes heavy. It crackled loudly as Conan unrolled it.

The message was crudely scrawled in Aquilonian. Conan scanned it silently, his dark face sullen, then handed it down to Prospero, who spelled it out slowly for the men to hear.

THE KING SHALL GO FORWARD ALONE TO POHIOLA. IF HE DOES THIS, THE SON OF HIS LOINS WILL NOT BE HARMED. IF HE DOES OTHER THAN THIS, THE CHILD WILL DIE IN WAYS IT IS NOT WHOLESOME TO DESCRIBE. THE KING SHALL FOLLOW THE PATH MARKED WITH THE WHITE HAND.

Prospero examined the rusty-scrawl of runes, then gave a little exclamation of disgust. The message was written in blood.

## **FOUR: The White Hand**

So Conan went forward alone into the moorland beyond the borders of Aquilonia. The conventional course would have been to return to Tanasul, muster the civil guard, and ride against misty Hyperborea in force. But, had Conan followed that course, the assassins would murder the boy. All that Conan could do was to follow the commands in the parchment scroll.

Conan had given Prospero the great seal-ring of massive gold he wore on his right thumb. Possession of that ring made the Poitanian regent of the kingdom until Conan returned. If he did not return, his infant second son would become rightful king of the Aquilonians, under the dual regency of Queen Zenobia and Prospero.

As he had voiced these instructions, staring into Prospero’s eyes, he knew the gallant soldier would follow them to the letter. And there was one instruction more. Prospero should raise the levy of Tanasul and ride after him, to invade Hyperborea on his heels and make for the citadel of Pohiola.

This was to give Prospero a sense of purpose. But Conan knew that one man, well mounted, could ride farther and faster than a full troop of horses. He would be within the glowering walls of Pohiola long before Prospero's force could possibly arrive to be of any help.

This land was called the Border Kingdom. It was a dreary waste of desolate, empty moors which swept off to the dim horizon. Here and there gnarled and stunted trees grew sparsely. Waterbirds rose flapping from misty bogs. A cold, uneasy wind whined through rattling reeds with a lonely song.

Conan went forward, careful of his footing but with all possible haste. His red roan, Ymir, was winded from the night-long ride through the forest, so Conan had taken the big gray from Baron Guilaime of Imirus. The fat peer was the heaviest man in the party other than Conan himself, and his burly-chested gray was the only steed that might bear up under the weight of the giant Cimmerian. Conan had thrown off his hunting gear, donning a plain leather jerkin and a well-oiled shirt of close-linked mail. His broadsword was slung between his shoulders to leave his hands free. He had hung a powerful Hyrkanian bow, a length of supple silk cord, and a quiver of black-feathered cloth-yard shafts on his saddlebow. Then he had ridden off across the moors without a backward glance.

At first he followed a clearly marked trail, for the steeds of the Hyperboreans had left a track in the muddy soil. He pushed the gray stallion hard, for he wanted to make the best possible time. There was the slimmest of chances that, with luck and the favor of Crom, his savage god, he could catch up with the white-skinned kidnapers before they reached their keep of Pohiola.

Soon the trail of the Hyperborean horses faded out on stony soil. But there was little chance to lose the trail, for now and again he passed a sign that his son's abductors had left to guide him; the imprint of a hand, white against rock or soil. Betimes it was seared into the dry, scrubby grass of a hummock like a pattern of frost left by a blast of preternatural cold.

Witchcraft! He growled, deep in his throat, and his napehairs prickled. His own homeland, Cimmeria, lay to the northwest. His primitive folk knew of the White Hand, dread symbol of the Witchmen of Hyperborea. He shivered at the thought that his son was their captive.

But he rode on, over the dreary plains with pools of cold black water and scrubby patches of bracken cut by meandering streamlets and dotted by hummocks of dry grass. Hour after hour he rode steadily, as the world darkened around him towards night. One by one the stars came out, though they were faint and few, for a haze overhung the sky. When at length the moon emerged, it masked its cold face behind a lacy veil of vapor.

Toward dawn he could ride no more. Stiff and aching, he climbed down and tied a bag of grain to the muzzle of his gray. He built a small fire with dry bracken, stretched out with his head pillowed on his saddle, and fell into a heavy sleep.

For three days he rode ever deeper into this dreary wasteland, skirting the swamp borders of the Great Salt Marsh. This sprawling bog may have been the remnant of a vast inland sea that had rolled over all this land ages ago, perhaps before the dawn of civilization. The ground was becoming treacherous, and the deeper he rode into the Border Kingdom, the worse the footing became. The big gray wound through the bogs, head down, testing each hummock for soundness. The pools of cold, muddy water became more numerous. Soon Conan was riding through a treeless swamp.

Twilight came, plunging the bogland in gloom. The gray stallion shied nervously, as his hooves came out of the sucking mud with a smacking sound. Bats swooped and chattered in the dusk. A mottled, clay-colored viper, thick as a man's arm, slithered noiselessly over a mold-covered log.

As the darkness thickened, Conan set his jaw and drove the gray forward. He meant to keep going all night again and to rest toward midday if he must.

Ahead, the path branched. Conan leaned from the saddle to study the bracken. A smooth stone lay exposed by the incessant rains. Upon that stone he glimpsed again a weird white blazon in the shape of an open hand. He tugged the stallion's head around and drove it into the pathway marked by the White Hand.

Suddenly, the muddy heather was alive with men. They were filthy, gaunt, and naked save for twists of greasy rag about their loins. Long, matted hair lay in a tangle about snarling faces.

Conan roared a deep-chested challenge and pulled the stallion up. He ripped the broadsword clear of its scabbard.

The beast-men were all about him now, grabbing at boots and stirrups, pulling at the skirt of his mail, seizing handfuls of mane to drag the horse down. But the gray's hoofs slashed out. One caught the foremost man in the face and cracked his skull. Pulped brains splattered amidst flying blood. Another caught a big-chested man on the shoulder, shattering his arm.

Conan's blade whistled, making heads jump from spurting necks, knocking brutish figures flying. Five he slew; a sixth he clove from pate to jaw. But the steel bit deep in tough bone. As the corpse fell back, the sword was wrenched out of Conan's grip. He sprang after it, splashing, and the yelping herd of beastlike men were all over him. Feral eyes gleamed; talonlike fingers raked his arms. They dragged him down, muffling him beneath the weight of sheer numbers. One brought a club of knotted wood down on Conan's temple. The world exploded, and Conan forgot all about fighting.

## **FIVE: A Phantom From The Past**

Out of the dim and swirling mists, the rounded knoll of a hill loomed up before them on the stone-paved way. Worn and weary from days and nights of travel, Conn blinked bleary eyes at it.

The crest of the knoll was crowned with a mighty keep, a rude castle built of huge, cyclopean blocks of unmortared stone. Ghostly in the dim starlight, indistinctly seen through the crawling film of mist, it looked like an apparition. Squat towers rose at either end of the massive edifice, wreathed in coiling fog. Toward the frowning portal of the looming keep they rode. As it grew nearer, Conn saw the great portcullis slowly lifting. The half-starved boy repressed a shudder. The rise of the spiked grille of rusty iron was like the slow yawn of a gigantic monster.

Through the vast portal they rode, into an enormous hall weirdly lit with the flickering light of torches. The portcullis came down behind them, to ring against the stone pave like the knell of doom.

Cold white hands plucked the boy from the saddle and tossed him into a corner. He crouched against the dank wall of stone, staring around him. Bit by bit, the features of the vast, echoing hall began to emerge from the gloom. The keep was one tremendous hall. The roof, whose rafters were lost in the darkness, loomed far above his head. The only visible furniture was a rude wooden bench or two, a couple of stools, and a long trestle table. On the table lay a wooden platter laden with cold scraps of greasy meat and a sodden lump of coarse black bread. The boy eyed this garbage hungrily. As if sensing his thoughts, the old woman muttered a command. One of the men took the platter from the table and set it down beside Conn.

His hands were numb, for they had bound his wrists to the saddle horn during the days and nights of riding. The man cut the thong that bound his wrists and slipped a length of chain about his neck, padlocking the other end to a rusty iron ring in the wall above his head. Conn fell on the remnants of the meal as the man watched silently.

The Witchman had removed his ivory mask, so that Conn could see his face. It was pale and bony and bore an expression of inhuman serenity. Conn did not like the thin, colorless lips or the cold glitter of the green eyes but was too hungry, cold, and miserable to care what his captors looked like. Another man came over with a few pieces of dirty sackcloth draped over his arm. He tossed these down beside the chained lad; then both men left him alone. After he had eaten all there was, Conn scraped together some of the filthy straw wherewith the floor of the immense, echoing hall was strewn. He piled the sacking upon this, curled up, and fell asleep at once.

The dull sound of a gong awoke him. In this gloomy pile of stone, the light of day never pierced, so Conn had lost all sense of time.

He looked up, rubbing his eyes. A low, circular stone dais rose in the center of the hall; upon this the witch was seated tailor-fashion. A great copper bowl of glowing coals had been set before her, shedding a wavering light the color of blood upon her face.

Conn studied her narrowly. She was old. Her face was worn with a thousand furrows, and her gray hair dangled loosely about the expressionless mask of her features. But life burned strongly within those eyes of emerald flame, and their uncanny gaze was fixed upon nothingness.

At the foot of the dais one of the black-clad men crouched, striking a padded mallet against a small gong in the shape of a human skull. The dull ringing of the gong echoed eerily.

The Witchmen entered the room in single file. They had donned their ivory masks and pulled the tight black cowls up to cover their silky hair. One led a naked, shaggy-headed man. Conn remembered that while crossing the endless swamps days before, the death-worshippers had taken this man captive. They had tied a noose about his neck and made him either trot along behind their horses or fall and be dragged. The man was deformed, witless, and filthy. His mouth hung open and his eyes gleamed with fear.

An uncanny ritual now took place. Two Witchmen knelt and secured the captive's feet with a thong suspended from a rafter. Then they slowly drew the naked man up until he hung head-downward above the copper bowl of simmering coals. The man writhed and screamed to no avail.

Then they cut his throat from ear to ear.

The victim wriggled and flopped, then slowly went limp. Conn watched, eyes wide with horror. Blood gushed down upon the coals and exploded in a cloud of smoke. A nauseous stench arose.

All this time, the witch stared sightlessly ahead. Conn observed that she was swaying from side to side, humming a tuneless air. The black-clad men stood motionless about the dais. The coals crackled and snapped. The corpse hung dripping. The thin, eerie moan of the witch's song droned on, punctuated by the monotonous rhythm of the gong. Conn stared with helpless fascination.

The stinking smoke hung in a greasy pall above the dais, eddying to and fro as if to the touch of invisible hands. Then the white-faced boy repressed a start.

"Crom!" he gasped.

The roiling cloud of smoke was taking on the shape of a man: a large, broad-shouldered, powerful man, draped in some Eastern robe whose cowl was thrust back to reveal a shaven pate and a grim, hawklike face.

The illusion was uncanny. The witch droned on. Her rasping song rose and fell like a cold wind moaning through the timbers of a gibbet.

Now color flushed through the man-shaped phantom: the folds of the robe darkened to a shade of green and the stolid visage became a swarthy, ruddy brown, like the face of a Shemite or a Stygian. Frozen with fear, the boy searched the translucent phantom with wide eyes. The illusion had a face he dimly remembered seeing, or hearing described—those aloof, aquiline features, that grim, lipless mouth. Where the eyes should have been were two sparks of emerald fire.

The lips moved, and the distant echo of a voice resounded through the shadowy hall.

"Hail, O Louhi!" said the phantom. And the witch answered:

"Greetings, Thoth-Amon."

Then, in truth, did the chilly claws of fear close around Conn's heart, for he knew he was in the grip of no casual kidnapper: He was in the clutches of the most deadly and tenacious foe of his race, the earth's mightiest black magician, the Stygian sorcerer who had long ago sworn by his evil gods to bring Conan the Cimmerian down to a terrible death and to crush Aquilonia into the mire.

## SIX: Beyond Skull Gate

Toward sunrise, Conan struggled groggily to consciousness. His head ached abominably, and blood from a torn scalp had dried down his face. But he still lived.

As for the shaggy beast-men of the swamp country, there was no sign of them. They had fled into the night, bearing off their dead and their loot. Groaning he sat up, nursing his throbbing head in his hands. He was naked save for boots and a ragged clout. Horse, mail, provision, and weapons had been stripped from him. Had the beast-men left him for dead? Perhaps; and only the thickness of his skull had kept the Cimmerian from that ending.

Legend whispered that the beast-men were the degenerate spawn of generations of escaped criminals and runaway slaves who had fled hither for sanctuary. Centuries of inbreeding had debased them to little above the level of animals. Odd, then, that they had left his body untouched; for men reduced to their primitive level often developed a lust for human flesh. Not until Conan had staggered to his feet did he discover what had driven the beast-man away.

Seared into muddy grasses, near where he had been struck down, was the imprint of the White Hand.

There was naught else to do but go on afoot. Fashioning a rude cudgel from the branch of a twisted tree, the burly Cimmerian struck out for the northeast, following the trail blazoned for him by the White Hand.

As a savage boy in his wintry homeland, he had learned how to live off the land. As king of proud Aquilonia, it had been many years since last he had been forced to hunt and kill to live. Now he was glad old skills died hard. With stones hurled from a rude sling improvised from a strip of cloth ripped from his clout, he brought down marsh birds. Lacking the means to make fire in these sodden bogs, he plucked the fowl and devoured them raw. With the cudgel, swung with all the iron strength of massive thews, he beat off wild dogs that attacked him. With sharpened sticks he probed for frogs and crayfish in muddy pools. And ever he kept moving north and east.

After an endless time, he came to the edge of the Border Kingdom. The entrance to Hyperborea was marked by a curious monument calculated to strike fear into the hearts of men. Under a lowering sky, hills rose in a grim rampart. The trail wound through a narrow pass between two rounded knolls. Embedded in the nearer flank of one hill was a weird marker. It shone gray-white through the gloom and damp of Hyperborea. As he came near enough to make it out, he stopped short and stood, massive arms folded.

It was a skull, manlike in shape but many times larger than that of a man. The sight raised Conan's nape-hairs with primal awe and stirred to life shadowy myths of ogres and giants. But as he studied the vast shield of naked bone with narrowed eyes, a grim smile tugged at his lips. He had traveled far in his years of adventuring, and he recognized the grisly relic for the skull of a mammoth. The skulls of beasts of the elephant tribe bear a superficial resemblance to those of men, save, of course, for the curving tusks. In this case, the telltale tusks had been sawn away.

Conan grinned and spat. He felt heartened; those who use trickery to inspire superstitious fear are not invulnerable.

Across the brow of the mammoth skull, enormous Hyperborean runes were painted.

In his travels, Conan had picked up a smattering of many tongues. With some difficulty he could read the warning written in those uncouth characters.

"The Gate of Hyperborea is the Gate of Death to those who come hither without leave," ran the warning.

Conan grunted contemptuously, strode on through the pass, and found himself in a haunted land.

Beyond Skull Gate, the land fell away in a bleak plain broken by naked hills. Crumbling stones lay bare under a brooding sky. Conan went forward through clammy mists, every sense alert. But for all he could tell, naught lived or moved in all this shadowy land of unseen peril.

Few dwelt in this cold realm of fear, where the wintry sun shone but briefly. They who ruled here reigned from high-towered keeps of cyclopean stone. As for the common folk, a few miserable, terror-haunted serfs in clusters of dilapidated hovels eked out a drab life from the barren soil.



The gaunt gray wolves of the north roamed these desolate prairies in savage hunting bands, he knew; and the ferocious cave bear made its home in stony caves under the dripping skies. But little else could dwell in this inhospitable waste, save a rare band of reindeer, musk ox, or mammoth.

Conan came at length to the first of the stone-built keeps; this he knew to be Sigtona. In Asgard they whispered grim tales of its sadistic queen, rumored to live on human blood. He skirted it widely, searching for the next mountainous citadel.

After an interminable time he espied the grim pile of Pohiola, lifting its crest of squat turrets against the stars. Naked, famished, filthy, and unarmed, the indomitable Cimmerian gazed upon the stronghold of the Witchmen with burning eyes. Somewhere within that fortress of dark stone, his elder son huddled. Somewhere within that lightless and labyrinthine edifice, perhaps, his doom awaited him. Well, he had crossed swords with Death ere this, and from that desperate contest had emerged the victor.

Head high, he went through the darkness to the portals of Pohiola.

## SEVEN: The Witch-woman

The iron fangs of the portcullis hung above the stone-paved way that led to the great gate. The gate itself was a mighty door of black wood, studded with the heads of iron nails. These nails spelt out some protective rune in a tongue even the burly Cimmerian did not know. The door was open.

Conan strode within. The stone walls, he grimly noted, were twenty paces thick. He passed into the central hall of the great keep. It was deserted, save for an old woman with lank gray hair. She squatted atop a circular stone dais, staring into the flickering flames of a dish of red coals. This he knew for Louhi, priestess-queen of the Witchmen, who regarded her as the living avatar of their death-goddess. Boot heels ringing on the stone pave, the half-naked giant strode the breadth of the mighty hall and took a bold stance before the dais, arms folded upon his breast.

After a while, she shifted her cat-green glare from the simmering coals to his face, and Conan felt the impact of her gaze. She was old, lean, and withered, but he sensed an extraordinary personality behind that wrinkled mask.

“Thoth-Amon says I should slay you on the spot, or at very least load you with chains heavy enough to bind ten men,” she began. Her voice was throaty and metallic.

No flicker of emotion touched Conan’s stern visage. “Let me see my son,” he growled.

“Thoth-Amon says you are the most dangerous man in the world,” she continued calmly, as if he had not spoken.

“But I have always thought that Thoth-Amon was himself more dangerous than any other man living. It is odd. Are you really so dangerous?”

“I want to see my son,” he repeated.

You do not look so very dangerous to me,” she went on serenely. “You are strong, yes, and you have great powers of endurance. I doubt not that you are brave enough, as mortal men count bravery. But you are only a man. I cannot understand what there could be about you that moves Thoth-Amon to fear,” she mused.

“He fears me because he knows that I am his doom,” said Conan. “As I shall be yours, unless you take me to my son.”

Her wrinkled face froze, and eyes of lambent green glared coldly into Conan’s. He glowered at her, his gaze of smoldering volcanic blue blazing under black, scowling brows. Her gaze intensified, cold and piercing. His glare did not falter, and it was the green eyes that fell at last and looked away.

Inhumanly tall, impossibly slim, a lantern-jawed, milk-faced man with flaxen hair, clothed in glove-tight black, appeared at Conan's side as if in response to an unspoken call. The Witchwoman did not look up, and some of the calm strength had left her rasping voice when she spoke.

"Take him to his son," she said.

They had immured Prince Conn at the bottom of a stone-lined pit sunk deep in the floor of the vast, echoing hall. It was like a dry well, built of the same unmortared stone as the rest of the keep, and it was an effective cell for a prisoner. They lowered Conan into the depths of the hole by a rope which was drawn up after he reached the bottom.

The boy was huddled at one side, against the wall of the shaft, on a pile of damp sacking. He sprang to his feet and flung himself into his father's arms as soon as he recognized the half-naked giant. Conan crushed the boy to him in a fierce hug, growling sulfurous curses to disguise the unmanly tenderness he felt. Ending the embrace, he seized the boy by the shoulders and shook him, promising him a caning he would never forget if ever again he acted so stupidly. The words were threatening and their tone was gruff, but tears were running down his scarred face.

Then he held the boy at arm's length, looking him over carefully. The boy's raiment was torn and dirtied, his face pale and hollow-cheeked, but the king could see that his son was unharmed. He had come through an experience that would have left most other children of his years hysterical. Conan grinned and gave him an affectionate hug.

"Father, Thoth-Amon is in this," Conn whispered excitedly.

"I know," grunted Conan.

"Last night the old witch conjured him up," Conn went on eagerly. "They hung a savage by his heels over the fire and cut his throat and let the blood run down on the coals!! Then she conjured Thoth-Amon's spirit out of the smoke!"

"What did they talk about?"

"When Thoth-Amon heard that you were crossing the Border Kingdom alone, he wanted her to kill you with her magic! She asked why do that, and he said you were too dangerous to live. They argued for a long time about that."

Conan rubbed a big hand over his stubbled jaw. "Any idea why the witch refused to kill me?"

"I think she wants to keep you and me alive as a sort of way of keeping Thoth-Amon under her control," the boy confided. "They are in some sort of plot together, with a lot of other magicians all over the world. Thoth-Amon is a lot stronger and more important than the old witch, but so long as she has you he doesn't dare try to boss her too much."

"You may well be right, son," Conan mused. "Did you overhear anything more about this plot? Plot against what?"

"Against the kingdoms of the West," Conn said. "Thoth-Amon is the chief of ail the wicked magicians in the South, Khem and Stygia and Kush and Zembabwei, and the jungle countries. There's a sort of wizard's guild or something down there called the Black Ring ..."

Conan started, voicing an involuntary grunt. "What about the Black Ring?" he demanded.

The boy's voice rose with excitement. "Thoth-Amon is the high chief of the Black Ring, and he's trying to league with the White Hand here in the north, and with something way out in the Far East called the Scarlet Circle!"

Conan groaned. He knew of the Black Ring, that ancient brotherhood of evil. He knew of the abominable sorceries practiced by the votaries of the Ring in the shadow-haunted crypts of accursed Stygia. Years ago Thoth-Amon had been a powerful prince of that order, but he had fallen from power and his place had been taken by another, one Thutothmes. Thutothmes was dead, and now it seemed that Thoth-Amon had arised to supremacy at last, at the head of the age-old fraternity of black magicians. That boded ill for the bright young kingdoms of the West.

They talked until Conn had told his father all he knew. Then, worn out by his adventures, the boy fell asleep, pillowed against Conan's brawny torso. His arm about the shoulders of his son in a gently protective embrace, Conan did not sleep. He stared grimly into the darkness, wondering what the future would bring.

## **EIGHT: Adepts of the Black Ring**

Three men and a woman sat in thronelike chairs of black wood atop the huge stone dais which rose amidst the great hall of Pohiola. The chairs were ranged in a half-circle about a vast copper bowl filled with glowing coals.

Beyond the walls of the cavernous keep, a thunderous storm raged wildly. Lightning slashed through boiling black clouds like knives of flame. Sleety rain whipped against the looming stone pile. The earth shuddered to the peals of thunder, which exploded amidst the storm clouds.

Within the hall, however, the din of the storm was stilled to a murmur. Gloom shrouded the vastness of the mighty keep. The air was dank and cold. The four sat silently, and between them was stretched an ominous tension. They watched one another out of the corners of their eyes.

From far off in the echoing darkness, a double file of the black-clad servants of the White Hand approached. Among them the majestic figure of Conan towered. His dark face was impassive, and firelight gleamed on his naked chest. At his side strode his son, head high. The Witchmen brought them to the foot of the dais.

Conan lifted his glowering gaze to stare directly into the cold black eyes of a powerfully built man in a dark-green robe, with a shaven pate and flesh of dark copper.

"We meet again, dog of a Cimmerian," said Thoth-Amon in gutturally accented Aquilonian.

Conan grunted and spat.

Father and son had slept and waked, been fed, and slept again. Disdaining to reply, Conan turned his gaze on the others who sat enthroned. The Hyperborean Witchwoman he knew, but the other two were strangers to him. The first was a diminutive, effeminate little man in fantastic jeweled robes, with amber skin, fleshy arms covered with glittering rings, and the cold, bright, soulless eyes of a snake.

"This is the divine Pra-Eun, the Lord of the Scarlet Circle, the sacred god-king of jungle-girdled Angkhor in the remote east of the world," said Thoth-Amon. Conan made no response, but the plump little Kambujan smiled suavely.

"The so-great king of Aquilonia and I are old friends—although he knows me not. He once did me the kindest of favors," he said in a high-pitched, lisping voice.

"I fear I know not this tale," Thoth-Amon confessed. Pra-Eun smiled brilliantly.

"But yes! Some years ago he did to death the formidable Yah Chieng—perhaps he recalls the occasion? That person was a most powerful sorcerer of Khitai. He was my rival and my superior, as head of the Scarlet Circle. I am beholden to the brave monarch of Aquilonia, for had he not slain the miserable Yah Chieng, I should not today be the supreme master of my order!"

Again, Pra-Eun smiled brilliantly, but Conan noticed that his smile did not reach as far as his eyes. They remained as hard and cold as the eyes of a viper.

Beyond the little god-king sat Louhi in her robes of white; and beyond her a savage black towered. He was a magnificent specimen of manhood, his oiled arms sleek with gliding thews, his woolly head crowned with nodding plumes. About his muscular torso was flung a cloak of leopard skins. Rings of raw gold clasped his wrists and upper arms. His stolid features were immobile. Only the eyes moved and lived, and they burned with feral red flames.

“And this is the great boccor or shaman, Nenaunir, prophet and high priest of Damballah—as his people call Father Set—in far Zembabwei,” continued Thoth-Amon. “Three million naked blacks will arise to sweep all the world below Kush with flame and blood at one word from Nenaunir.”

Conan said nothing. The magnificent black grunted. “He does not look so dangerous to me, Stygian,” he said in a cold, deep, heavy voice. “Why do you fear him so?”

A darker hue stained the features of Thoth-Amon. His lips parted but, before he could speak, the old woman uttered a harsh laugh.

“I agree with the Lord of Zembabwei!” Louhi rasped.

“And I have planned a small entertainment for the pleasure of my guests. Kamoinen!” She clapped her hands.

The circle of Witchmen parted, permitting one of their number to step forth. He had a long, whey-colored face and pale blue eyes. In the thin fingers of one white, bony hand he held a slim black rod less than one pace-in length. It was tipped at each end with a ball of dully gleaming metal, slightly smaller than a fowl’s egg.

He saluted his queen. “Command me, Avatar,” he said in a toneless voice. The cat-green eyes flashed in the stern, wrinkled mask. They burned upon Conan with malignant fires.

“Beat the Cimmerian to his knees before us,” she rasped, “so that my colleagues can see they have little to fear from this man Conan!”

The slim, black-clad man bowed low. Then he swung upon Conan, ball-tipped rod blurring through the air. But the wary Cimmerian took a great leap backwards to avoid the strange wooden rod whose purpose he did not understand. It hissed past his face, ruffling his gray-shot mane as it flew.

The two circled in a half-crouch. Conan clenched and unclenched his heavy hands. His savage instinct was to spring upon the gaunt Hyperborean and crush him to earth with one sledgehammer blow. But something warned him to be wary of that slender, harmless-looking baton that swung so agilely from the long white fingers.

Standing back among the Witchmen, young Conn chewed his knuckles. Suddenly he took his hand away and shrilled out a rapid sentence in Cimmerian. It was a harsh, uncouth tongue, full of singsong vowels and crashing, guttural consonants. None in the room, save his sire, knew it.

Conan’s eyes narrowed. The boy had warned him that the Witchmen plied their rods against sensitive nerve clusters. Suddenly Conan lunged like a striking tiger at his opponent, clumsily lifting a balled fist as if to sweep him off his feet with a wide blow. The weighted rod flicked out at his elbow.

As the rod flashed for the joint of Conan’s right arm, whose fist was lifted above his head, the Cimmerian swiveled suddenly and smashed the rod aside with his left.

The blow only grazed Conan’s left forearm, but it sent a bolt of pain lancing from wrist to shoulder. This, however, did not really matter. Conan gritted his teeth against the pain and smashed the man flat with a crushing blow of his balled right fist.

In the same blur of furious action, Conan bent, snatched the Witchman up before he hit the floor, whirled on the balls of his feet, and sent his antagonist frying through the air.

The flailing black-clad figure flew and hit the huge copper bowl atop the dais. The bowl was filled to the brim with blazing, red-hot coals. It went over with a noisy clang, bathing the four astounded adepts in a fiery shower.

Louhi screamed as her white robes burst aflame. Thoth-Amon roared, shielding his face with his arms as blazing, blistering coals spewed over them. In his clumsy haste to avoid the flying shower of flame, the little Kambujan knocked over his throne. He tripped across its legs and fell into the puddle of flame.

The hall exploded in chaos. The circle of black-clad guards had broken their immobility, but they were too late. For Conan was among them in an instant, knocking them about like tenpins. His big scarred fists smashed left and right, and with every blow he dealt a cracked skull, a broken jaw, or a mouthful of shattered teeth.

Young Conn, too, burst into action. Not for nothing had Conan tutored the boy in the art of rough-and-tumble.

The instant his father closed with his first opponent, Conn whirled and kicked the nearest Witchman on the kneecap. The man staggered and fell. Conn kicked him in the head, snatched up a wooden stool, and swung it with both hands at the nearest Witchmen. In the first ten seconds, he felled four men with it.

On the dais, the god-king of Angkhor flopped and squealed, his face a seared and blackened mask of pain. Booming his war cry, the gigantic black snatched up a wooden throne-chair and hurled it at Conan.

Conan fell prone, and the heavy chair smashed into the circle of his foes, knocking them sprawling. In a flash, the giant Cimmerian sprang over the tangle of men and leaped upon the dais. His hands lunged at the throat of Thoth-Amon.

But the old witch blundered into his path. Her white robes were a mass of flames, and her screeching rose above the clamor. Conan stumbled aside as she hurtled down the steps of the dais, wrapped in fire. In that instant, Thoth-Amon made his move.

A sudden flash of green flame brightened the hall in a soundless puff of emerald brilliance. The uncanny radiance swirled about the Stygian as Conan stopped to snatch up Louhi's throne as a weapon.

But even Conan's blurring speed was too late. As he hurled the chair, Thoth-Amon, wrapped in green luminescence, faded from sight.

Conan turned. The room was chaos. Scattered coals had set the straw on the floor aflame; maimed and broken men were strewn about the cavernous hall. Afar he spied his son valiantly swinging the stool. The boy had already injured half a dozen Witchmen, but others closed about him, swinging their deadly rods. A score of the Witchmen were leaping up the steps of the dais for Conan, faces grim and cold, deadly black rods flicking.

## **NINE: Night of Blood and Fire**

Conan snatched up the copper bowl. The heat remaining in it seared his fingers, but he flung the huge vessel into the first rank of the charging Witchmen. They went down in a tangle of arms and legs. Conan whirled in time to see the mighty black fade from view in a second flare of soundless green fire. That magic, it seemed, could bridge the vast distances of space between frigid Hyperborea and far, jungled Zembabwei. It was obvious that the adepts had used much the same method to travel here in the first place.

"Cimmerian!"

Something in the tone of that lisping voice froze Conan. He turned his head.

The Kambujan was a sorry sight. His fantastic jewel-covered robes were black with soot, ripped and torn. His gem-encrusted crown had fallen away, revealing his shaven skull. His face was hideously blackened and blistered. But through the seared mask his eyes blazed with deadly power into Conan's.

One hand, covered with burns, blisters, and glittering rings, was extended. But a weird force flashed from the tense, quivering fingers to bathe the mighty Cimmerian.

Conan gasped. His flesh numbed as if he had been suddenly plunged into the depths of an icy river. Paralysis seized his limbs.

Setting his teeth, he struggled against the spell with all his might. His face blackened with effort; his eyes bulged in their sockets. Then the tension drained from him. He was frozen into immobility, and all his giant strength could not break the spell.

Crouched amidst the coals, the little Kambujan smiled, although his burned face winced at the movement of seared lips. Unholy glee blazed in his cold, ophidian eyes.

Slowly he extended his arm to its full length, mumbling strange words of power.

Pain ripped through Conan's mighty heart. Darkness swept about him, sucking him down.

And then, with a sharp thud, the vaned butt of a crossbow bolt appeared, protruding from the side of Pra-Eun's shaven skull. The rest of the missile was buried in the Kambujan's brain. The cold black eyes glazed and went dull.

A shudder swept through the crouched figure. Then the dead thing wobbled and fell forward. The spell snapped, and Conan was free.

He staggered, caught himself, and stood gasping as strength and vitality flooded back into his benumbed flesh.

He raised his eyes and looked over the corpse of Pra-Eun. At the far extremity of the hall, Euric the huntsman lowered his massive crossbow. It had been the riskiest shot of his career, hitting the crouching sorcerer across the length of the gloom-drenched hall.

Behind him, crowding into the hall, came a dozen mail-clad knights and a hundred stout guardsmen in the livery of Tanasul. Prospero had come at last.

As dawn lit the east with pink flame, Conan wrapped a warm wool cloak about the shoulders of his son. Although his hands were bandaged over the burns inflicted by the copper cauldron, he lifted the weary boy astride one of the guardsmen's horses. The long, terrible night of blood and fire was over, and the ending was a happy one. Prospero's knights had swept the keep from end to end, slaughtering every last member of the Witchwoman's following. A good night's work, the crushing of the cult of death-worshippers which had ruled the north with the cold hand of terror.

Conan looked back. Flames shot through the arrow slits of the fortress of Pohiola. Already the roof of the keep had fallen in. Buried in the rubble, under tons of crushed stone, lay the corpses of Pra-Eun and Louhi. Had he not warned Louhi that he would be her doom? Prospero had ridden like the wind back to Tanasul, had pulled together a fighting force in hours, and had plunged back on the long trail across Gunderland and the Border Kingdom as if a thousand devils were at his back.

By day and by night, he and his grim-faced levy had flogged their horses on, haunted by the fear that they might arrive too late. But they had come, as it chanced, at just the right time. Even as they rode within bowshot of the great keep, no eye had been at battlement or loophole to observe their approach. And the reason was that Conan was holding at bay half a hundred Witchmen and the four most deadly magicians on earth.

The portcullis was up and the great iron-studded door had swung open at a touch. The servants of the White Hand were too contemptuous of lesser men and too confident in the powers of their cat-eyed queen to bother with bolting the door.

Thunder shook the earth. Flames shot up to the heavens. Behind them the great keep came crashing down in ruins. Pohiola was no more, but its evil would linger in myth and fable for thousands of years.

Weary and travel stained, but with heart-deep content shining in his eyes, Prospero came up to where Conan stood, leaning upon the horse that bore the sleepy boy. Conan's eyes flashed.

"You even remembered to bring my Black Wodan!" he grinned, slapping the great stallion on the flanks. It nosed him affectionately.

"Shall we go home now, sire?" Prospero asked.

"Aye—home to Tarantia! I've had a bellyful of hunting. And of being hunted! Devil take these Hyperborean fogs! I've the sour taste of them in my throat" Conan growled. He thoughtfully gazed about.

"What is it, sire?"

"I was just wondering—would you have any more of that good red wine of the Poitanian vineyards? As I recall, after the hunt, there was a little left..."

Conan broke off, flushing. For Prospero had begun to laugh until the tears were pouring down his cheeks, cutting runnels through the caked dust.

# BLACK SPHINX OF NEBTHU

## ONE: Place of Skulls

Night lay like an ebon pall on the trampled, blood-soaked earth of Zingara. Through flying tatters of mist, as through a ragged shroud, the cold white skull of the moon leered down on a scene of horror. For the rolling, barren plain that sloped down to the shallow Alimane was encumbered with the sprawled, gore-splashed corpses of men and their mounts. In silent hundreds dead knights and yeomen lay, some face-down in pools of congealing blood, others on their backs, with dead eyes staring up into the grinning jaws of the mocking moon. The hideous mirth of hyenas rang weirdly through the still air as the scavengers crunched and gobbled.

Few dwelt in this dreary northeastern corner of Zingara, and those few had been further thinned by centuries of war with and raids from Poitain, across the Alimane. The land had been largely abandoned to the prowling wolf and the slinking leopard. Some whispered that the semi-human ghouls, legended to haunt certain hills in central Zingara, had recently been seen in this region also. Tonight there were the makings of a feast for both ghouls and hyenas.

The Zingarans called this grim region the Place of Skulls. Never before had it so well earned its name; never had the bitter sands drunk so deeply of hot blood. Never before had so many hacked and shaft-pierced men gone wailing down the red road to Hell, to litter the bleak waste with their bones.

And here the bright imperial dreams of Pantho, duke of Guarralid, had been drowned in darkness, and the fires of his vaulting ambition had been quenched in blood. The throne of Zingara was vacant. For that prize, Pantho had gambled all. He had led his band of adventurers into Argos and made himself master of its western provinces. Old King Milo of Argos and his elder son had fallen in battle before him.

Then Duke Pantho had suddenly thrust his army deep into sunny Poitain, across the Alimane. Men supposed that he had done this to secure his rear before striking for the Zingaran capital of Kordava. But they could only guess, since none knew for certain, and Pantho's tongue had been silenced forever by an Aquilonian sword.

Some whispered over flickering candles in southern taverns that a demon had taken possession of the great duke, or a sorcerer had sent a spell of madness upon him, goading him into this foolhardy venture. For, as everyone knew, the leopards of Poitain crouched between the paws of the mighty lion of Aquilonia. King Conan, ruler of the mightiest kingdom of the West, had instantly hurled his iron legions against Pantho in retaliation for this breach of the border.

The armies had first clashed on the green plains of Poitain. The wild Zingaran charge had broken like surf against the stolid pikemen of Gunderland, while the shafts of the Bossonian archers mowed the Zingaran knights down, nailing helmet to head and thigh to horse. As Pantho withdrew his mounted knights to regroup for a second charge, Conan had unleashed his own cavalry. Conan's own guard, the Black Dragons, had led the charge. Conan himself rode in the van, a warrior so heroic that a thousand legends clung like a cloak of glory about his towering frame.

The Zingarans faltered and broke. They fled in a mad scramble back across the marches of Poitain to Zingara. But Conan was angry, and his anger was such as to shake thrones and make princes turn pale. Leaving his foot to follow as best it could, Conan had hurled his horse across the Alimane in pursuit. On the desolate Place of Skulls, a few leagues south of the Alimane, Conan had caught up with the battered Zingaran host and cut it to ribbons. Many Zingarans died, some yielded. Few escaped. Pantho's bright dream had drowned in a crimson sea.

On a knoll commanding a view of the desolate, corpse-strewn battlefield stood a great tent. Above it flew a black banner charged with a golden lion, the ensign of King Conan. About the base of this hillock stood the tents of the lesser nobility, including one surmounted by the banerole of Poitain. Here old Count Trocero of Poitain gulped wine and cursed his surgeons as they dressed his wounds.

The army itself camped on the plain roundabout. Weary warriors snored in their blanket rolls or squatted by guttering fires. They dined for prizes: gold-inlaid shields, plumed helmets, swords with gems twinkling in their hilts. With dawn they would drive deeper into Zingara to set a puppet on Ferdrugo's throne and end the dynastic squabbles that for years had roiled the peace of this contentious land.

Before the king's tent, guardsmen of the Black Dragons stood with naked broadswords, guarding the rest of their lord. But there was little sleep for Conan that night. Inside the tent, lanterns glowed and flickered in their wrought-iron cages. Weary, battle scarred commanders sat or stood about. At a folding table inlaid with precious ivory from distant Vendhya, the great king brooded over maps of crackling parchment as he planned the morrow's march.

Conan had seen over half a century of battle and bloodshed, and the years had left their mark on even so mighty a king. Time had laid its silver in the coarse black hair of his square-cut mane and had grizzled the heavy black mustache that swept out from either side of his long upper lip. Strange suns had burnt his flesh to a leathery hue, and weary years had etched furrows among the scars of war and conquest. But power still lay in the massive thighs, and the vitality of his barbarian heritage still blazed in the deep-set eyes of volcanic blue that glared beneath scowling black brows.

Shifting his massive limbs and growling for wine, Conan stared at the maps. The sting of several small wounds annoyed him no more than the bite of a gnat, although a softer, city-bred man might have been stretched groaning on his pallet had he shed the blood that the Cimmerian had lost that day. While Conan pondered and consulted with his officers, his squires fussed about him, unbuckling the many straps of his harness, gently removing plate after plate, while the surgeon gingerly washed and bandaged his cuts and salved his bruises.

"This one needs must be sewn, sire," said the surgeon.

"Ouch!" grunted Conan. "Go ahead, man, and pay no heed to my plaints. Pallantides, which were the quickest route hence to Stygia?"

"That one, sire," said the general, drawing a forefinger across the parchment.

"Aye; I followed it to here when I fled from Xaltotun's sorcery..."

Conan's voice trailed off. With his chin on his massive fist, he stared unseeing into space and time. A shadow of suspicion crossed his brain, evoked by the memory of his struggle with the dread Acheronian sorcerer, Xaltotun, a decade and a half before.

There was something about this mad invasion by Duke Pantho that did not fit what he had heard of that astute and crafty adventurer. Only a fool or a madman would have hurled his army against one of Conan's most loyal and warlike provinces. Conan, who had matched steel with Pantho that day and split the duke's skull with one terrific stroke, did not think that the man had been either mad or foolish.

He suspected an unseen hand behind that addle-pated expedition, a shadowy figure lurking at Pantho's back. He smelled a plot. In fact, he smelled sorcery.

## **TWO: Destiny in White**

The captain of the king's guard that night was one Amric, an adventurer out of Koth, drawn to golden Tarantia years before by the magic of Conan's name and the legend of his prowess. "Amric the Bull," his fellow Black Dragons called him—as much for his amatory prowess as for his headlong onset in battle. He was barrel chested and deep voiced. Like many Kothians, he was olive of skin, with perhaps a trace of Shemitish blood, as suggested by his thick, ringleted black beard. When a quiet little man in dirty white robes came gliding through the murk to the king's tent, Amric alone knew him for what he was.

"Fires of Moloch!" Amric swore. "A druid out of Pictland, or I'm a eunuch!" He shifted his sword to his left hand so as to sketch a protective sign on the night air with his right.

The small man laughed and lurched; Amric suspected that he was drunk. "Your sins have found you out, Amric of Khorshemish!" he said.



Amric swore heartily, invoking the nether organs of several of the more disreputable eastern demon-gods. He paled, and sweat beaded his brow. His fellow guards looked curiously at him, for never in the fiercest battle had they seen their captain show fear. They eyed the little man with curiosity and suspicion.

He was a harmless-looking person, well past middle years. Save for a few straggling wisps of thin white hair, he was bald as an egg. He had watery blue eyes in a pale, loose-wattled face. His legs, where they showed beneath his robe, were as scrawny as a fowl's. All in all, he was a most unlikely person to find on a battlefield.

"He knows you, Bull," rumbled a blond Vanr. "Is't a daughter, old man, with an unexpectedly black-avised babe, or an unpaid wineshop bill the size of a duke's treasury?"

The others laughed loudly, but Amric scowled. "Keep civil tongues in your heads, you northern heathen," he rumbled. Turning to the small man, who leaned on his staff with a faint, cherubic smile, he bowed and pulled off his dragon-crested helm.

"What can I do for you, Holy Father?" he asked with more civility than was his wont.

Amric had learned the wisdom of such politeness years before, when he had served on the Bossonian Marches. There he had seen the terrific power wielded by mild-seeming white-robed men like this, who walked with oaken staves and with golden sickles thrust through their girdles as emblems of their rank. For they were the druids, the priests of the Ligureans. The Ligureans, a race of light-skinned barbarians who dwelt in small clans in Pictland, intermingled with the shorter, darker, and more savage Picts. Those bloody savages, who feared neither god, man, beast, nor devil, still cowered before the authority of the druids.

"I am fain to see your king ere taking a bit of rest," said the little man. Casually, he added: "I am Diviatix, chief druid of Pictland. Pray tell your king Conan that I am come from the Great Grove with a message. The Lords of Light have given me a command for their servant, Conan, and I bear his destiny in my hand."

Amric the Bull shivered, signed himself with the sign of Mitra, and meekly turned to obey the behest of the White Druid.

Conan sent his commanders away, ordered hot spiced wine, and sat back. He ignored the sting of his bandaged wounds to listen to the spindle-shanked little messenger from Pictland.

The king of Aquilonia cared little for the priests of any god. His own shadowy Cimmerian god, Crom, was indifferent to the woe or weal of mankind, as befitted one of the Old Gods who one day chanced playfully to mold the earth from a lump of mud and set it spinning amid the stars for an idle jest—thereafter paying it little heed, perhaps forgetful they had wrought it at all. But, like Amric, Conan had borne a blade against the howling Pictish hordes and deeply respected their prowess. Not even the mighty warriors of the frozen North, in their berserker madness, could long stand against the inhuman ferocity of the Picts, whose neighbors and allies the Ligureans were only a shade less fierce.

As for the mystic wizard-priests of the Ligureans—Conan's long, bloody career had brought him into contact with half the cults and creeds of the world. Of them all, he thought, none stood so near the blinding flame of ultimate truth as did the quiet, smiling, white-robed men who wore the oak-leaf crown.

It took several cups of mulled vintage to get the whole message out of Diviatix. Conan had heard of the priest, for he was first among the world's druids. More than once had the gods spoken to the men of his age through the lips of this unimpressive sleepy-looking old man, notoriously fond of the juice of the grape. Even the bloodthirsty war chief of the Pictish Confederation, Dekanawatha Blood-Ax, who knelt to no man or devil, groveled in the dirt as Diviatix ambled past his palace-hut, its mud-bricks dyed russet with the blood of countless foes.

From the Great Grove at Nuadwyddon had the chief druid come, obeying the Lord of the Great Abyss, Nuadens Argatlam of the Silver Hand. Diviatix bore a message from the Lords of Creation to the grim giant they had brought out of wintry Cimmeria long years before to crush evil in the world's West. The token they bade the White Druid bring was a small tablet of nameless stone, slick and heavy as jade but as purple as the towers of age-forgotten Valusia. Conan knew of that stone, albeit 'not even the iron-bound Book of Skelos dared whisper of it.

For an hour by the ringed time candle, Conan listened to the White Druid's sleepy, wine-befuddled discourse. The moon sank; dawn ensanguined the east. The heir to the throne of Zingara, daughter of the late King Ferdrugo, had come out of exile with her husband to beg the king of Aquilonia for help in regaining the crown. But Conan kept Princess Chabela, with her consort Olivero and their highborn entourage, waiting on the slope below his tent while he queried the sleepy little man in tattered robes that had once been white.

With dawn, the trumpets sang. The tents were struck, and the knights of Aquilonia mounted up. Conan settled the problem of the Zingaran royal succession in ten minutes. He had known Chabela twenty years before, when she had been a buxom lass still in her teens and he, captain of a Zingaran privateer. Then Conan had saved the throne and fortunes of old King Ferdrugo from the villainous schemes of the Stygian master-sorcerer, Thoth-Amon.

In the intervening years Chabela had put on weight. She was still a handsome woman but in a plump, matronly fashion. The graying king kissed her heartily, asked after her eleven children, but did not linger to hear her account of their inches and illnesses. He bade her harried consort kneel, slapped Olivero on both shoulders with the flat of his nicked broadsword, and heard his oath of allegiance and fealty. Conan issued a curt fiat proclaiming the flustered couple rightful king and queen of Zingara under the overlordship of Aquilonia. He dispatched them in haste to Kordava, with a troop of Aquilonian knights to see them safely installed.

Then, stifling a prodigious yawn, Conan swung up on his black stallion, and the lion banner moved southeast to the tread of six thousand horses and foot. Southeast to the Argossean border and beyond that toward Stygia.

## **THREE: The March to the Styx**

They marched southeast by stages often hours each. The steady stride of the strong Aquilonian yeomen ate up the leagues, and the army was across the border of Argos before the Argosseans learned that Duke Pantho, whose incursions had shattered their peace, was no more. Conan sent a message to Milo's second son, young Ariostro, who was trying to rally the scattered Argossean forces in the South. This princeling was told that the Zingaran menace had been dissipated, so that nought prevented Ariostro from proclaiming himself king of Argos. Meanwhile, King Conan would count it a courtesy if Ariostro would graciously permit the Aquilonian force to pass through his dominion on their way to Stygia.

Then Conan dispatched heralds in black-and-gold tabards to his vassal-kings, Ludovic of Ophir and Balardus of Koth. He curtly bade them each to raise a force of two thousand horse and foot. These forces were to rendezvous with the Aquilonians at the ford of Bubastes on the Styx, between the green meadows of Shem and the tawny sands of Stygia.

League after league, Conan drove deeper southeast in grim silence, pressing his men hard. With them came the little druid in a rattling mule cart. Conan told none why he had sent the senior herald, Black Wyvern King at Arms, back to Tarantia guarded by a troop of light horse. Even Prospero and Trocero dared not ask him about his intentions. His old comrades knew better than to question him when he was in one of these dour, secretive, taciturn moods.

Conan descended upon Shem like a steel whirlwind. By forced marches, he drove his army across the meadowlands in fifteen days. From time to time they passed one or another of the Shemitish cities, each of which raised its drawbridge and locked its gates in alarm, rousing archers to man the walls.

Conan dispatched Trocero with heralds to pacify each agitated Shemitish kinglet in turn. The old Count, a silver-tongued master diplomat, soothed the tempers ruffled by this unexpected intrusion. To the ruler of each petty city-state he explained that the Aquilonian army was but passing peacefully through, with—it was hoped—the kind permission of the Shemitish princelings. A token tribute of good Aquilonian silver was paid over, each thick coin stamped with Conan's square-jawed, scowling profile. Relieved, their ruffled pride sleeked by Trocero's oratory, the kinglets beamed graciously and waved the Aquilonian host on with their blessings.

The army, of course, had meant to go on anyway. But it is better, Conan had learned, to do these things with official blessing when possible. To be fair, Conan saw that his troops observed his laws against looting and raping. The few of his soldiers who turned aside to chase a dark-eyed Shemitish wench into a thicket or to leaven their field rations with some peasant's fat pig were promptly hanged in view of their comrades. It went against Conan's grain to deprive the poor fools of their lives, for as a young mercenary, he, too, had done the same offenses many times.

But the law is the law. The last thing Conan wanted when he reached the borders of ominous, hostile Stygia with his modest force was to leave an aroused countryside at his back buzzing with outraged petty kings and swarming with vengeful soldiery. Ordinarily the Shemitish city-states did not bother the neighboring nations, being occupied with their internal royal feuds and theological bickerings. The one thing that would unite them, however, was the passage of a marauding, murdering foreign army. Conan had fought with Shemites before, both at their side and against them. He knew that the hooknosed, black-bearded, mailed asshuri were, man for man, as tough and ferocious as any soldiers in the world.

One weary afternoon, white with road dust, they reached the shores of the Styx and camped behind a screen of willows. An hour's march away lay the Ford of Bubastes. They sat for a day and a half, resting men and horses and honing and oiling weapons, while the troops from Koth and Ophir arrived to join them.

Next morning young Prince Conn, elder of Conan's two legitimate sons, rode into camp at the head of a troop on lathered horses. At thirteen, the crown prince of Aquilonia was the spit and image of his mighty sire. Almost as tall as even the towering knights of Aquilonia, he had Conan's broad shoulders, deep-arched chest, square-cut mane of coarse black hair, and strong, square-jawed face.

The boy had ridden across Shem in six days but looked as if he had been out for an afternoon's canter. His fierce blue eyes sparkled with excitement, and fresh color blazed in his cheeks. He galloped into camp on a big gelding, acknowledging the roar of welcome from the troops with a grin and a flip of his hand. The youth was a favorite with the men, and the Black Dragons would have ridden into the jaws of Hell for him as readily as for his mighty sire.

The prince reined his horse to a halt before the royal tent, vaulted out of the saddle, and knelt grinning before the king. Conan kept his face grave although he was bursting with pride and affection. He acknowledged the prince's salute, but as soon as they were inside the tent he crushed the boy in a rough bear-hug that might have snapped the ribs of a frailer lad.

"How fares your lady mother?" he demanded.

"She is well," Conn replied—then, with a mischievous grin: "but she shrieked and wailed like a wounded buffalo to hear that you wanted me in the field. Her last words were to keep warm at night and not to get my feet wet!"

"How like a woman!" grunted Conan. "I remember my old mother, back in Cimmeria... But you should not compare your lady mother to a buffalo, boy! That's impertinent!"

"Yes, sire," said the youth contritely. Then, eyes sparkling, "But are we really going to cross over into Stygia, father? Do you really want me with you in battle?"

"Crom, boy, how can you learn the art of war without a little fighting? When you ascend the throne, you'll have to hold it against war and revolution. The exercise yard is all very well, but the battlefield is the schoolyard of future kings. Just see to it that you hold the place in ranks to which I assign you; no galloping alone against the foe, trying to rout them singlehanded! Come, how are your brother and sister?"

Conn relayed reports on his younger brother, seven-year-old Taurus, and baby sister, Radegund.

"Good!" said Conan. "Did the priests come with you as commanded?"

"Aye. They bear a little box of orichalc covered with strange glyphs, and they would not tell me what was in it. Do you know, father?"

Conan nodded. "That's what you might call our 'secret weapon.' Now get a good repast and a good night's sleep. Ere dawn we shall cross into Stygia!"

## FOUR: Beyond Death River

The dark, gliding waters of the Styx mark the border between Shem and Stygia. Some call it the River of Death, saying that the clammy vapors that rise from the marshes are hostile; others, that the muddy waters are inimical to all forms of life, so that no fish or other creatures swim in them. This last is untrue, for at night along the banks one can hear the harsh grunt of the scaly cocodrill and the thunderous snort of the burly hippopotamus. But certain it is that the waters are hostile to human life, and he who bathes in those waters is soon stricken with a wasting and incurable disease.

Where the headwaters of the Styx rise, no man can say. It originates somewhere far to the south of the tawny sands of Stygia, in the jungled lands beyond Keshan and Punt. Some whisper that it rises in Hell itself, to flow through the lands of living men like a gliding black serpent.

Before dawn crimsoned the eastern horizon, Conan was on the move. The king, on his big black, led the way across the Ford of Bubastes to the low, reedy shore beyond. On the far side stood a half-ruined blockhouse of crumbled mud brick. Once it had guarded the crossing, but disturbances in the sinister kingdom of Stygia had led to its neglect, and it had not been repaired. The Stygians depended upon swift-moving mounted patrols along their borders to keep strangers at bay, but none of these was now to be seen.

To the right and left of the blockhouse stretched fields of yellow winter wheat, rippling in the dawn breeze. In the middle distance to the right, barely visible against the dun-colored background, a small village of mud-brick huts crouched on the edge of the river. Ahead, as the ground sloped gently up from the Styx, the palms, shrubs, and cultivation that lined the river gradually gave way to a scattering of camel-thorn and other desert plants.

Conan, flanked by Trocero and Pallantides, commander of the Black Dragons and second in command Conan, kicked his horse up the slope of a knoll. He watched gloomily as, company by company, the Aquilonian host splashed through the ford in a long double column. As each unit of infantry emerged from the water, its captain led it to a vacant spot along the marge. There the men were made to sit, pull off their boots, and dry their feet and footgear. The king had so commanded. The men muttered at this strange proceeding. But Conan, who had been in these parts before, deemed it a vital precaution against the disease that lurked in the black waters of Death River.

Meanwhile a few troops of light horse cantered up and down the river and inland to scout for possible trouble. Sitting in his saddle beside Conan, Count Trocero chewed his mustache. At last he spoke:

“Sire, isn’t it time you shared your thoughts with us?”

Conan grunted moodily and nodded. “Aye, my friend, I have kept you in the dark long enough.”

“Then why in Mitra’s name are we in accursed Stygia?” asked Pallantides.

“Because this is the land of our secret enemy, Thoth-Amon the sorcerer.”

Conn, sitting his gelding nearby, pricked up his ears. “Thoth-Amon!” he exclaimed. “The one that got the old witch of Pohiola to kidnap me last year, trying to get you into her clutches?”

“There is only one Thoth-Amon,” said Conan broodingly, “and Crom knows the earth will be cleaner without him. The White Druid bore warning of his schemes.”

“Do you mean that spindle-shanked little old winesop, Diviatix?”

“That spindle-shanked old winesop is the greatest white magician alive on earth in our age,” said Conan. Trocero gulped and shuddered, remembering the times he had snarled at the staggering old tosspot to get out of his way. Conan continued grimly:

“The oracle of the Great Grove in Pictland reveals that the Stygian wizard was behind Pantho’s crazy thrust. The sorcerer either bribed Pantho or seized command of his mind through his black arts.”

“But to what purpose?” asked Trocero. Pallantides had ridden away down the hill to get the army into formation for the next march. Conan continued:

“Merely a diversion, to get me away from Tarantia. The Stygian knew I would ride to join you against the Zingarans. He hoped that Pantho and I should play hide-and-seek in the hills for a fortnight or two, keeping me so busy I should not have time to worry about Tarantia ...”

“Tarantia! Not the queen?”

“Be calm, man. Zenobia and the royal heirs are safe. But there’s something in Tarantia that Thoth-Amon desires more than anything on earth—even more than my life. He hoped to get it in my absence. He hired the world’s cleverest thieves—the High Guild of Arenjun—to steal that thing.

“But Thoth-Amon miscalculated. He never dreamed that I should smash Pantho so quickly, nor that the oracle of Nuadwyddon would send the White Druid to apprise me of the plot. Nor did he know that the spring rains would block the mountain passes out of Zamora, delaying the master thieves and ruining his delicate timing.

“He thinks me still in the North, chasing Pantho over the hilltops of Poitain. Believing me ignorant of his plan, he has no cause to suspect otherwise. The White Druid has kept our descent into Stygia invisible to the magical vision of the Stygian, or as invisible as possible. With luck, we shall be at his gates ere he knows we are within a hundred leagues of him.”

“What is this thing he so desperately wants?” asked Trocero.

“I know, Count!” said the boy. “It is ...”

Pallantides cantered up and saluted. “The baggage is over the river, O King!” said the general. “The men are ready to march.”

Conan nodded. “Give the signal: east along the river for three leagues, till we come to a small tributary, the Bakhr. Then south, ascending that stream for half a league. I am coming shortly.”

Conan glared inland, into the dawn-reddened reaches of shadow-haunted Stygia.

“Twice in as many years,” he mused, “a plot has struck at my throne out of this accursed land of crumbling tombs and crawling sands. This time I will carry the battle to the enemy’s doorstep. Mayhap his sorcery will strike us dead, but I think not. The Gods of Light fight on our side. And, come death or victory, I shall beard Thoth-Amon in his lair and see if he can magic away a yard of good Aquilonian steel through his guts!”

The bugles blew and they rode down the slope to join the host.

## **FIVE: The City of Tombs**

A curse seemed to overhang Stygia. The further the Aquilonian warriors marched into it, the more they became aware of it. It was a subtle thing: mocking whispers in an eerie wind, muttering voices that spoke too low to be understood. Small, whispering winds slunk among the dunes and rattled the palm fronds. The soldiers had the haunting sensation of unseen eyes at their backs. The sun glared pitilessly from behind a thin veil of white cirrus, and the dry air gave the marchers a feeling of constant thirst.

They passed another village—a jumble of low, dun-colored mud huts whose brown-skinned inhabitants fled yammering over the waste at the sight of the mailed host. The Bakhr proved to be a small, stagnant, muddy watercourse, from whose banks several monstrous cocodrills slithered ponderously into the water at the approach of the force.

The army turned inland—south—and marched up the tributary, skirting the reed banks and thickets that flanked it. The men muttered uneasily and fingered amulets or mumbled litanies and mantras under their breath. But the force strode on, ever deeper into shadow-haunted Stygia.

Prince Conn cast an eye at the sun and cantered forward to come up with his sire. “Father, are we not riding due south?”

Conan grunted assent.

“But,” persisted the boy, “I have always heard that this Thoth-Amon dwelt in an oasis called Khajar, far to the west of here!”

Conan shrugged. “At least, lad, your tutors have taught you to read maps. But Thoth-Amon dwells no more in that scarlet sink of iniquity. Now he makes his lair in Nebthu.”

“Nebthu?”

“A ruined city to the south; we shall be there soon. Years ago, lad, Thoth-Amon rose to power in this land and became prince of the Black Ring, the world-wide guild of black magicians, whose secret headquarters, I am told, lies at Nebthu. The better to keep this unholy brotherhood under his governance, he removed from his lair in the west to Nebthu.

“Once he lost his magical ring of power, and his enemies among the sorcerers cast him out. He fell into the hands of slavers and was brought as far from his home as Aquilonia.”

“Was it he who sent the demon that would have slain you, but for the sign of the phoenix on your sword?”

“The same. By happenstance, Thoth-Amon recovered his ring and returned to Khajar. Meanwhile a rival sorcerer, Thutothmes, had risen to command of the Black Ring, making his headquarters in Khemi. Thutothmes based his power upon a mighty talisman called the Heart of Ahriman.

“For a time, the Black Ring was riven into two factions, that of Thutothmes and that of Thoth-Amon. But, ere the battle between them was fairly joined, Thutothmes perished in combat with a crew of Khitan wizards who had followed me thither to slay me. The Khitans died also, and I bore the Heart back to Tarantia.

“Now however, Thoth-Amon has again seized control of the Black Ring, seeking to draw all the black magicians of the world into his circle of confederates. The oracle tells me that he is at Nebthu.”

Conn nodded thoughtfully. Count Trocero, who had been listening closely, asked:

“Is this city well guarded?”

Conan shrugged. “Mitra knows. The last rumor I heard was that it was long since abandoned and crumbling into ruin. Perchance the wizards have rebuilt it and patched its walls. But even if they have, with ten thousand sharp swords at our backs I am sure we can storm it.”

“We shall be doing just that, belike.” said the shrill voice of the druid, bumping along behind them in his mule cart.

Trocero turned in his saddle to look at the little man, who seemed to be drunk as usual. The count forced a polite smile and muttered:

“It likes me not, this empty, accursed land.” Conan made no answer; they rode on in silence.

The sun was declining when scouts came galloping back to the column to report. Nebthu was dead.

Soon the army came within sight of the ruin. The huge wall that had once encircled the city had crumbled, leaving upright only the great pylons that once flanked the gate. These pylons, carved with the leering gargoyle masks of grinning monsters, still rose above the drifted sands.

Save for a few birds that rose from the ruins and whirred away, there was no sign of life. No plume of smoke rose from cooking hearth or guardhouse fire. Roofs had fallen in; buildings had decayed into mere mounds of crumbling mud brick.

Conan’s horse shied at a round white stone in the roadway. As the black’s hoof grazed it, the thing rolled a little way before halting. Black holes peered up. It was a skull, fit emblem of Nebthu, city of immemorial tombs. Naught moved here save the scuttling scorpion, the gliding sand viper, or perhaps the wandering ghosts of long-buried Stygian kings.

“Now what do we do?” murmured the count of Poitain.

“Make camp and fetch water from the Bakhr,” growled the king. “After that, we shall see.” The skull grinned up at them in silent mockery.

## **SIX: The Thing That Crouched in the Waste**

They made camp outside the broken walls of the ruined city. Conan knew that his warriors would not sleep easily in the sand-drifted streets or rubble-choked squares of the Stygian metropolis. Magical influences often lingered about any ancient ruin, and this was all the more true of age-accursed Stygia than of other, more wholesome, lands.

While a detachment of soldiers cut armfuls of the feathery reeds that grew along the Bakhr, for fodder for the horses, scouts explored the desert about the walls of Nebthu. Soon the scouts rode back to report that nothing lived or moved amidst the dunes. They had, however, found one thing in the waste: a gigantic idol or monument. As the afternoon waned, Conan led a party to investigate, while the cooking fires were lit in the camp. Conan’s big black shield, rolled its eyes, and laid back its ears as they approached the stone monster.

“Crom, Mitra, and Varuna!” said Conan as he gazed upon the stone titan that loomed before them against lurid sunset skies. Trocero cursed; as for the White Druid, he called on Nuadens, Danu, and Epona and took a hasty swig from his wineskin as if to fortify himself.

The statue crouched amid the waste like some primal monster. It was made of some smooth, lustrous black stone, like jet or basalt. Its form was sphinxlike, but its head was neither that of a lion nor that of a man, but of some beast of prey with a long skull, round ears, and massive jaws. It crouched doglike, as if it were some gaunt jackal.

“I thought the black magicians of this hellish land all worshiped Set the Old Serpent,” said Trocero. “What hellspawned devil-thing is that?”

Diviatix rubbed his eyes. “By the horns of Cernunnos, ’tis the ghoul-hyena of Chaos!” he said. “I had not thought ever to see its likeness wrought by human hands.”

As Conan peered more closely in the fading dusk, he saw that the sculptor of the hyena-sphinx had achieved an extraordinary fidelity to life. The loose lips of the beast were slightly drawn back to reveal its blunt, bone-crushing fangs, as if it would rise up any moment and hurl itself, slobbering and snapping, upon them. Conan’s nape hairs stirred and a cold breath of ominous foreboding chilled his blood.

“Let us begone,” growled the king, “or that black abortion will haunt our dreams tonight...”

The coals of sunset smoldered out; gloom enshrouded the sands of Stygia. The new moon closely followed the sun down the sky and out of sight, leaving the vault of heaven to a vast multitude of brilliant stars which glowed and twinkled red and green and white in strangely unfamiliar constellations.

A town of tents sprang up in the desert near Nebthu. Cookfires blazed, casting a cheerful orange glow over the dim sands. A subdued host ate its rations and lay down, wrapped in blankets, to seek an uneasy slumber. Sentries—twice the usual number—alertly paced the perimeter. The desert night was empty, dark, and silent; but alive—and waiting.

Weary from many days of forced marching, Conan was too restless to sleep. After midnight, he rose and called a squire to light an oil lamp. He poured himself a small stoup of wine and sat on his camp stool, senses tingling with alertness, as if his barbarian instincts had roused him to some unseen danger.

Growling a curse, he pulled on breeches and padded haqueton. “My armor,” he told the squire. “Nay, nay, not the plate; the chain shirt. We wend afoot tonight.”

He disregarded his full knightly panoply because it would have taken too long for the squire to buckle the many straps and because its great weight would have slowed him down on foot. Donning boots, steel cap, and baldric, he stood for a moment, brooding. Then he unlocked his strongbox and took out the small box of orichalc, which the priests of Mitra had brought from Tarantia.

Entering the nearest tents, Conan shook Trocero and Conn awake. Then he went in to rouse the White Druid. He found the little man wide awake, wrapped in a blanket and huddled shivering before a brazier. Diviatix seemed like one in a daze, like the Khitans whom Conan had seen bemused on the fumes of the poppy.

“Rouse yourself, druid!” he said. “I sense danger.”

The flabby jowls of the Ligurean priest were pale, his eyes vacant and haunted. He stared into the darkness with a black, unseeing stare.

“Eyes,” he whispered. “Shadows with eyes. There is evil in the night...”

Conan shook the hunched figure by the shoulder. “Up, priest! Is it drunk that you are again?”

Diviatix blinked and laughed weakly. “Drunk? By the breasts of Mother Danu, King, I have swilled enough wine to send half this host staggering, but I am cold sober!” Conan shivered and whirled, peering into the darkness. But there was nothing there—nothing but shadows.

## **SEVEN: Shadows with Eyes**

Conan strode out into the dim, star-filled night. The bemused druid, bearing his oaken staff, trotted at his heels. Trocero, armed and alert, awaited his coming with the yawning prince. Pallantides hastened up.

“What is it, sire?” asked the general.

“I know not, but something,” grumbled Conan. “Crom curse it, I can’t put a name to it, but something’s wrong...”

“Shall I rouse the host?”

“Not yet. Let the men get what sleep they can while they may. But double the sentries again. Let us make our own sentry-round; perchance the guards have seen something. Pallantides, lend me two stout men-at-arms who fear neither god, man, nor devil.”

A pair of yawning Gundermen presently approached with a clink of mail. They were big men, deep-chested with impassive faces and hard eyes. Conan looked them over, and liked what he saw. Then the king jerked his head. “Come.”

They strode down the sandy lane between rows of tents and out toward the edge of the encampment. But there, the sentries had seen nothing, although they had vigilantly prowled and peered. Amric, who commanded that sentry watch, said:

“Nothing at all. Lord King, save the far-off yapping of jackals. But some complain of... well, shadows’.”

“What kind of shadows?” demanded Conan.

The burly Kothian scratched his beard. “Well, sire, the men say—foolishness, I know!—that they see shadows where no shadows should be, not cast by any visible shape. The fools complain that the shadows watched them!”

“Shadows with eyes! My vision was true,” Diviatix moaned.

Conan chewed a tuft of his mustache. “Shadows, eh? They’ll be starting at mice next! Well, these lords and I will pace on sentry-go for a time, to see if we can find your prowling shadows.”



Loosening his blade in its scabbard, Conan led Trocero, Conn, the druid and the two soldiers around the camp. His boots squealed and crunched in the dry sand. The torches in the hands of the soldiers hissed and sputtered. Their flames streamed in the uneasy wind, sending shadows scurrying before and behind them as they trudged about the perimeter.

Young Conn stopped short, seized his father's arm, and pointed. Conan looked in the direction of the pointing finger and grunted.

"Footprints! It seems we have a spy, after all! For never yet have I heard tell of shadows that leave footprints in soft sand."

Trocero fingered his hilt. "Sire, shall I sound the horn and rouse the guard?"

"For one skulking spy? Nonsense, man! We'll track the rogue to his lair ourselves. Time enough to summon the watch if we stumble upon a nest of Thoth-Amon's Set-worshippers." Conan drew his steel. "You!" he said to one of the Gundermen. "Go back and tell Pallantides whither we have gone. Tell him to send a squad of stout rogues on our track, but that they shall not come up with us unless we get into trouble. I hope to catch the slinker unawares, and their clatter would alert him a league away."

Without further ado, the Cimmerian plunged off in the direction the footprints led. The long march without opposition had made the king restless and reckless. The others crowded after. Soon the track had led them over the dunes beyond the sight of the camp.

"Look, sire!" Trocero hissed, pointing.

Conan stifled a grunt. Was it a blur of strained eyes, a trick of shadows, or did he glimpse a form, hooded and cloaked in black, flitting before them toward the Black Sphinx?

"Follow me!" Conan whispered, plodding after the form.

## **EIGHT: That Which Fled in the Night**

As glittering stars wheeled slowly overhead, Conan and his companions crunched through the hissing sand on the track of the fleeing form. Ever it stayed just beyond the range of their vision, flitting ahead like a desert phantom.

Now the stony monster that dominated these wastes loomed up before them, blotting out the stars which outlined its hyena's head. The black-cloaked form flitted silently between the outstretched paws of the gigantic monster. For an instant they dimly discerned it against the breast of the towering sphinx; then it merged with the stone and vanished.

"Crom!" breathed Conan, his nape hairs rising with a barbarian's awe of the supernatural.

The mystery, however, was soon solved. As they neared the stony breast, they observed, barely visible in the starlight, a black crack in the smooth stone. It was a huge doorway, thrice the height of a man, cunningly made so that when shut, it would blend with the solid stone of the monster. As they approached, the door was slowly closing on unseen hinges, and the black crack was narrowing to a hairline.

Conan sprinted forward and jammed his sword hilt into the crack. The closing stopped. Then the king inserted his fingers into the crack and heaved. Sweat burst out on his brow, and the massive muscles of his arms, back, and shoulders stood out beneath his mail.

The portal opened with a squeal. Conan snatched up his sword from where it had fallen and, brandishing naked steel, sprang without a moment's hesitation into the gaping black maw. The others followed, although the druid hesitated.

To the remaining Gunderman, Conan said: "Give me your torch, what's your name—Thorus, is it not? Plant your pike so it holds this door open, and run back to the camp. Tell Pallantides to send a whole company after us. Yare, now! The rest of you, follow me!"

Within the sphinx they followed a high, wide corridor of solid stone. The torch guttered, stretching misshapen black shadows over the rough stone walls. Wary of traps and pitfalls, Conan and his companions traced the corridor, descending by a broad stone stair to the second level, beneath the sands of the desert.

"By Mitra, no wonder we found no one in the city," breathed Trocero. "The black magicians were all hiding down in this maze!"

In truth, it was a maze. Corridors branched off at intervals, multiplying until they became a labyrinth. Conan smeared a dab of pitch from the hissing torch at every change of direction, so that they could retrace their steps and regain the surface. But all the chambers they searched were untenanted and bare of furnishings. Where were the wizards of the Black Ring?

"Crom!" Conan wondered aloud. "Are there levels even deeper than this? If that philosophers' notion be true, that the world is round, meseems we shall soon come out the other side!"

As they descended another stair, Trocero urged: "Sire, should we not go back for help?"

"Mayhap; but I've a notion to search this place first," Conan growled. "The lads should be coming up behind us soon, and thus far we've found nought to beware of. Let us go on!"

At the foot of that last flight of stone stairs, they entered a gigantic chamber, huge as an arena, ringed with tiers of stone benches. Lifting his torch, Conan searched the nearby benches with its wavering light which illumined only a small fraction of the vast area. The place reminded Conan of the great hippodrome of Tarantia, save that the latter was out in the clean open air, not buried deep down in the fetid blackness below the world's crust.

"What do you suppose they use this place for?" he muttered.

Trocero opened his mouth to reply, but another voice broke in. It was a deep, strong, quiet voice, informed with the ring of triumph.

"We use it to dispose of our enemies, Conan of Aquilonia!"

Conan tensed. Before he could move, cold artificial light flared up, filling the vast arena with an uncanny and sourceless illumination almost as brilliant as daylight. By this illumination, the Cimmerian saw that the circling stone benches, on the further side, were occupied by hundreds of human figures, robed and cowled in black. To the right yawned a huge open portal, a yawning gulf of darkness, as large as that in the breast of the sphinx far above.

Directly before them, enthroned in a great chair of black stone above the lower rows of magicians, sat a tall, strongly built figure wearing a simple, unadorned green robe. This man had the shaven pate, swarthy skin, slitted dark eyes and hawklike features of a pure-blooded Stygian.

"Welcome to my empire," said Thoth-Amon, laughing.

Meanwhile, the second Gunderman, Thorus, whom Conan had dispatched to fetch reinforcements from the camp, lay silently on the sands beneath the wheeling stars, a bare hundred paces from the Sphinx of Nebthu, with a Stygian arrow through his throat.

# NINE: Red Swords of Stygia

Pallantides yelled commands at running men. Trumpets brayed and hoofbeats thudded on the hissing sands.

Things had started going wrong at just the time that Conan and his companions entered the black sphinx. First came the desertion of the troops levied from Koth and Ophir. They had encamped on the far side of the site, and sentries came flying to the general to report that the entire force had fled under cover of darkness, either in mass panic or by some prearranged plan.

Pallantides swore sulfurously. He ordered a squadron of horse to pursue the runaways, but then it transpired that the Aquilonians had no horses. The mounted Kothians and Ophireans had taken their own horses, while the Kothian and Ophidian foot had commandeered the mounts of the Aquilonians. The few remaining animals had been turned loose and had galloped off into the desert with the deserters.

Then the first of the two soldiers who had accompanied Conan arrived, to pass on the king's request for a squad of troopers to follow on his track. Pallantides was picking his squad and giving them the news to pass to the king, when another sentry rushed in to cry:

“To arms, my lord! We are beset! The hordes of Stygia are upon us!”

All around the camp, the somber dunes began erupting men, mostly archers on horse and camel. The darkness made it impossible to ascertain their number. They rode round the camp in a vast swirl, plying their bows. Although the darkness prevented accurate archery, the Aquilonians still suffered a rain of arrows, discharged at random into the camp. Here and there a man yelled or cursed as a shaft found him.

Atop the dunes, other Stygian soldiery appeared, shooting fire arrows into the camp. The missiles tore cometlike paths through the dark; a tent blazed up, and another.

Most of the Aquilonian soldiers had already been aroused by the commotion caused by the desertion of the auxiliaries. Summoned by the trumpets' blare and the war cries of the Stygians, they stumbled out of their tents, red faced and coughing from the smoke, pulling on helmets and buckling baldrics and chin straps.

“Put out the fires!” shouted Pallantides. “Strike the tents! Cenwulf! Where in hell are you?”

“Here,” said the captain of the Bossonian archers, staggering up to the general. “Where is the king?”

“Mitra knows; he went off into the desert, tracking a spy. Spread your men around the perimeter and pick off some of these flitting black-cloaks. Detail a squad to beat down those bastards on the dune, with the fire arrows. Amric!”

“Here, general.”

“Spread the men around in a circle outside the Bossonians, kneeling with pikes ready to stop a charge. Pile baggage before them and heap sand upon it for a breastwork...”

Thoth-Amon smiled grimly down from his place of power in the underground arena.

“For too long, Cimmeria... have you stood in my path,” said the earth's greatest black magician. “I saw you venture into these southern lands from your frozen north, forty years ago. I ought to have crushed you then, when you were small and weak. Had I but known how your power would grow, I should have struck you down with a blast of magic—that first time, when you meddled in my affairs in the house of Kallian Publico; or again when you spoiled my schemes to wrest the kingdom of Zingara from King Ferdrugo's feeble grasp; or when I first glimpsed you in Count Valenso's stronghold on the Western Ocean; or in your early years of kinging it in Aquilonia when I was Ascalante's slave in Tarantia. These lapses, however, shall now be corrected.”

Conan handed his guttering torch to Trocero and folded his mighty arms upon his chest. His face impassive, he bent his lionlike glowering gaze upon Thoth-Amon.

“Speak your piece, Stygian,” he rumbled. “You have gone to immense effort and exhausted your cunning to trick me into this trap. You might as well have your say.”

A susurrations, like the hissing of a nest of angry serpents, ran through the black-robed throng. Thoth-Amon laughed sardonically.

“Well said, dog of a northlander savage! I admire your coolness as much as my fellow sorcerers deplore your effrontery! But now, neither will help you to escape your long overdue punishment. You have crossed my path once too often, and this is the last act of our little drama. I have trapped Aquilonia’s host as well as its king. As we exchange pleasantries, my warriors beleaguer your camp. Aquilonia’s tall knights are falling to our swords like ripe wheat before the scythe. More than a dynasty ends here tonight; the armed might of a kingdom perishes as well.”

Conan shrugged. “Mayhap. But I fear your slinking serpents little, and my tall knights will draw their crooked fangs with ease. My warriors, I doubt me not, are reaping a red harvest this hour ...”

“I do not fight with swords alone ...”

Thoth-Amon smiled, gesturing with the fingers of one hand. A bolt of emerald fire sprang from his fingertips. It lanced across the arena and struck the naked sword in the hand of Trocero. The steel, bathed in the green ray, glowed red. Trocero dropped the smoking sword with an oath and put his blistered fingers in his mouth.

”—but with sorcery as well,” Thoth-Amon concluded.

Conan continued to hold the glinting eyes of Thoth-Amon with his own somber gaze. “The only way to fight sorcery,” he grunted, “is with sorcery.”

The slight, hooded figure at Conan’s side stepped forth, throwing off its dark cloak to reveal a white robe and an oakleaf chaplet. The black magicians recoiled, hissing.

“It is a White Druid out of Pictland!” said a voice above the murmur.

“It is indeed,” said Thoth-Amon grimly. “Unless my senses deceive me, it is none other than Diviatix.”

“Diviatix!” The cry arose from a hundred throats. At a signal from the prince of sorcerers, they fell silent. The pressure of hundreds of eyes poured down upon Conan and his companions. The silent, concentrated power of those black, glittering eyes was unnerving.

Conan’s skin crept. A coldness like a small, bleak wind from one of his frozen northern hells blew upon his heart. He felt a numbness creeping through his flesh. His vision blurred; his heart faltered. Behind him, young Conn gasped and staggered.

“S-sorcery!” breathed Conan. A malignant power beat down upon him from those intense, glittering eyes. His head swam. In a moment, he thought, the iron would drain from his muscles and he would slump to the floor of the arena.

## **TEN: White Druid and Black Magician**

Then the druid broke the spell. He spread his arms and brandished his oaken staff. Conan was astounded to see fresh young leaves sprout from the dead wood of the staff. Diviatix stood at the center of a pulsing aura of golden light. From his staff wafted the smell of healthy earth and green growing things. The warm light and the good smell beat back the artificial witchlight and the dank, moldering stench that permeated these subterranean labyrinths of ancient stone.

The wizards of the Black Ring sagged back, their concentration broken. Some mopped sweat from their brows. Diviatix swayed, chuckling, as if all the wine he had drunk that night had at last caught up with him. But small and unprepossessing though he was, there was no question but that he dominated this assembly.

Thoth-Amon laughed no longer; his wrinkled brow was drawn together in a scowl of concentration. Drawing himself up to his full regal height, he smote the White Druid with a second beam of crackling green flames. Diviatix fended it off with his staff, and it broke into a shower of hissing sparks.

Thoth-Amon hurled another, and another, and another. Taking heart from their leader, the prime sorcerers of the Black Ring came to their feet, adding their own beams of green force to the shower of deadly bolts that beat down upon Conan's party. For a few moments, the pulsing aura staved them off like a golden shield. Then Diviatix began to weaken. While he still held the golden glow intact, some shafts of cold green fire leaked through to plow smoking furrows in the sand near where Conan and his comrades stood.

"White magic fails in the contest of strength, Cimmerian!" Thoth-Amon called.

"Well, then, perhaps it is time to strengthen it."

Conan drew from his girdle the small box of gleaming orichalc. From the box he took a great red many-faceted jewel. From it emanated a dazzling glow which pulsed and shimmered and seemed to drip flakes of quivering golden fire on the trampled sands. This sparkling gem Conan handed to Diviatix, who seized it as a drowning man might grasp at a helping hand.

As the druid took the jewel, the protective shield of golden light about them strengthened; a golden fire like that of the sun itself blazed up and smote the black magicians. They fell back shrieking; some pawed at their eyes, while others slumped in unconsciousness or death. The golden glory beat about the white-robed druid, who now seemed superhumanly tall and commanding. A wailing cry arose from the benches. Some black-clad forms struggled madly with each other, while some sought to flee by the smaller portals on the far side.

"The Heart!" gasped Thoth-Amon, sinking back in his black throne with his face pale, drawn, and gaunt. Suddenly the great sorcerer looked like an old, old man.

"The Heart of Ahriman!" he croaked.

Conan laughed heartily. "Thought you that I would venture into your den without the world's mightiest talisman? You must deem me still that raw, reckless, foolish youth who came out of the North forty years ago!

"For all these years, the Heart has slumbered in the vault of the Mitraeum. When the druid apprised me of your plot against it, I sent heralds to fetch both it and my son. With this amulet, old Diviatix has the power of a thousand of your wizards.

"That is why you so lusted for the gem—not to augment your own great magic, but to keep another from using it against you. That is why the Gods of the West drew this druid from his grove, hither across the wide world to the sandy wastes of shadow-haunted Stygia. No other white magician could stand against the temptation such power holds out to him who wields it—the power to make oneself a very god—save this drink-befuddled little man, this sanctified and holy vessel of the will of the gods!"

His visage curiously shrunken and pale, skull-like in the fierce golden fire that shone up from the figure of the druid, Thoth-Amon wilted. Of the lesser mages of the Black Ring, some lay dead or senseless; some gibbered and frothed in madness; some jammed the exits, clawing at one another in their frenzy to be gone. Diviatix held up the mighty arch-talisman, which focused stupendous forces like a lens. Beam after beam of glory flashed across the arena, and with each bolt a wizard died.

By now, Thoth-Amon alone still lived and had full possession of his faculties. Conan's nape prickled as he saw a shadow gathering about the Stygian—a clot of gloom, which wound about the sorcerer like the coils of a gigantic serpent. Had Father Set himself come to claim his chief votary? Thoth-Amon panted:

"You force me, against will and prudence, to play my masterstroke, dog of a Cimmerian!"

The shadowy coils about him darkened until he stood cloaked in utter gloom. Through this cloak of shadow, Thoth-Amon's eyes burned like glittering stars of dark fire. A chill passed over Conan as the Stygian uttered an enigmatic command in an unknown, guttural tongue. The human throat was never shaped to speak aloud that uncanny, bestial speech. The alien words re-echoed back and forth across the shadowy immensity of the arena.

AH eyes were drawn to the huge open portal at the farther end of the arena. Now something hulking and monstrous and unthinkable stirred to wakefulness beyond that yawning gulf of darkness. And Thoth-Amon laughed.

# ELEVEN: From the Black Gate

It came forth slowly from the abyss of darkness. At first Conan could not make it out, for it seemed but an extension of the darkness. But it was no insubstantial shadow, for the earth trembled beneath its ponderous tread.

“Crom!” muttered Conan between his teeth. His companions shrank back after one horrific glimpse of the moving shape.

“Gods, help us!” groaned Diviatix, “It is the living prototype of the Black Sphinx above! Earth was never meant to bear the weight of such a hell-spawned abomination. Think of the ages the accursed thing has dwelt here in the bowels of the black underworld! Now may the Lords of Light aid us, for not even the Heart of Ahriman can give me power over the Black Beast, the very child of Chaos itself!”

Conan raked the corpse-strewn benches with his eyes. None lived there; even Thoth-Amon had fled the coming forth of the beast that his prayers had roused from its aeons of slumber.

“Back up the stair behind us!” Conan barked. “Give me that torch, Trocero! Stir yourselves, for the beast is upon us!”

They raced back the way they had come, up the broad stairway and along the lofty corridor that they had traversed before. As they ran, Conan looked about for narrow passages through which the black beast could not pursue them—but found none. This vast hall would not delay the beast in the slightest; indeed, it might have been hewn from the rock for the monster’s convenience.

Their only hope of escape lay at the further end, where they might or might not find a narrow exit. Sword in hand and boot heels thudding, the king of Aquilonia ran down the immense hallway, breathing a prayer to the cold, indifferent gods of his northern homeland.

The camp had been crudely fortified with an embankment of baggage and sand, behind which crouched the spearmen of Gunderland, the knights of Aquilonia and Poitain, and the Bossonian archers. Whenever the swirling horde of Stygians came too close, the archers on signal rose and sent a volley of clothyard shafts whistling across the sands, now littered with corpses. The Bossonian longbows outranged the shorter weapons borne by the mounted Stygian archers. When the heavy Aquilonian shafts struck home, they pierced through mail and cloth and flesh to the vitals.

Pallantides, however, did not deceive himself about the desperate plight of his host. In the east the faint glow of false morning paled the stars. It would fade, but then the real dawn would arise. Without their horses, the Aquilonians could not defeat the mobile, mounted, and overwhelmingly more numerous Stygians. For the men to try to come to grips with their foes by toiling through the sand after them on foot would merely earn them all a quick demise.

The Aquilonians could hold their present position as long as their supplies held out, for the Stygians had no heavily armored men to break through the perimeter. But, with dawn, the Stygians would acquire a mighty ally: the desert sun. Even with the most careful rationing, the existing supplies of water would soon be drunk up, and men could not be sent down to the banks of the Bakhr to fetch more in the face of the foe.

Nor would the arrows of the Bossonians last forever. At the present rate, their quivers would be exhausted in an hour or two. The Stygians had only to keep circling the trapped army, showering its camp with their light but deadly shafts, and by the end of the day the Aquilonian force would be reduced to helplessness.

But the Stygians, it seemed, had other ideas. Unit by unit, the mounted archers drew off toward the Black Sphinx. They became mere bobbing black dots against the faintly paling sky and then disappeared behind the dunes.

When all had vanished from around the camp, Pallantides sent a soldier noted for his fleetness of foot out to scout. Stripped to shoes and breechclout, the man climbed the highest dune between the camp and the monument and ran back to report:

“Nay, general they be not retreating. They be all gathered around that great ugly black statue, and their general’s standing up on the rump of the critter, giving ’em a speech. Methinks they’re getting ready for a grand charge; I seen what looks like a company of armored horsemen in that black mail they wear.”

Pallantides turned to where his men, relaxing for the first time in hours, were eating hasty bites of cold breakfast.

“We can stop some with our shafts and some with our pikes,” he told Cenwulf and Amric, “but there are plenty more to take the place of these. We shall put our knights in the front rank, using their lances as pikes, since their armor is the best...”

But even as he spoke he heard the hollowness of his own words and knew their chances were few.

And where was Conan?

## TWELVE: The Black Beast Slays

Stone grated. The mighty portal swung open in the breast of the Black Sphinx. Upon the threshold towered Conan of Cimmeria, the light from the torch in his hand winking on his tunic of chain mail and flashing on the mirror surface of his naked sword. Behind him crowded Prince Conn, Count Trocero, and the druid Diviatix, who still bore the Heart of Ahriman in his fist.

Outside, the stars had dimmed in the east and the sky had visibly lightened. The colossal, doglike forelimbs of the stony monster stretched away at slightly diverging angles from the body, each forepaw being twice the height of a man. Beyond them lay the dunes, sparsely spotted with camel-thorn and tufts of dry grass.

Nothing moved in the angle between the forelimbs of the statue or in the visible desert beyond. From another direction, however, came the sounds of a large armed host: the creak of saddles, the clink of weapons, the nickering and stamping of horses, the grunts and bubblings of camels, the murmur of men. Over all these noises sounded the voice of the Stygian general, giving his units their orders and exhorting them to be valiant and destroy the filthy foreign worshippers of unclean gods. His harsh, guttural voice resounded through the lightening gloom.

Conan cocked an ear back towards the portal. “It’s after us,” he breathed, as the ground trembled to the tread of the hyena-headed monster. “Thoth-Amon must have summoned the whole damned Stygian army. If we run for the camp, and they see us, ’twill be the last...”

The vibrations grew stronger. From the unseen host gathered around the rear of the Black Sphinx came trumpet calls and the rumble of kettle drums. The Stygians were on the move.

“Follow me,” murmured Conan, thrusting his torch, which now bore only a small, smoky flame, into the sand to extinguish it.

The king led his comrades along the path between the diverging forelimbs of the statue. Behind them, a moving shape of darkness appeared in the opening in the sphinx’s breast. At the mouth of the great shaft that led down to immemorial crypts appeared a shape of living horror, leering and slaving. Huge as half a hundred lions, it peered into the darkness and sniffed the pre-dawn air.

A glance behind them sent Conan and his comrades scurrying. “That gully! Over there!” growled Conan, pointing. “Mayhap it won’t see us.”

They dashed to the gully that he had indicated and crouched, scarcely daring to breathe. The monster shambled out on their track just as the Stygian host, with much drumming and trumpeting, began to move. The first units passed the left paw of the statue—to find themselves riding parallel to the monster and only a few yards from it.

One Stygian uttered an exclamation; then others; then shouts of terror and amazement filled the night. Bowstrings twanged and a shower of arrows and javelins fell about the monster. These missiles were mere pin pricks to so vast a creature, but they stuck in its hide and roused it to fury.

It wheeled ponderously toward the host and for an instant towered over them, like the living cub of the stone monster it resembled.

Then it was among them! Its great paws swept right and left, dashing men and mounts head over heels in a welter of gore. The Black Beast waded through the slaughter, dipping its huge head with every stride to snatch up a Stygian and crunch him to jelly with one bite. The air was hideous with the shrieking of mangled horses, the agony and terror of broken men.

The Stygians did not lack courage. Horrified though he was, their general ordered one desperate charge. The beast swept his men to earth with its slashing paws and snapping jaws as fast as they came within reach. At last the Stygians went mad with terror, clawing and trampling one another in their haste to flee. Most of them were dismounted by the frantic leaps and buckings of their terrified horses and camels and had to slog through the sand afoot. And after them came the Black Beast, trampling and crunching. Ever it slew... and slew... and slew.

As the sun's golden disc lifted above the desert beyond the Bakhr, the monster returned from its slaughter. It moved with haste, shivering as the sun's inimical rays struck it, and squeezed through the great portal in the sphinx's breast. Then it was gone, and the vast stone door boomed shut behind it.

From a distance, Conan and his companions watched the disappearing monster. Then they trudged back to the camp. There the Aquilonians, drawn up in ranks of archers and spearmen determined to sell their lives dearly, could hardly believe their deliverance.

Some of the baggage had been lost in tent fires. A few men had died from Stygian arrows but many more were wounded, for those light, long-range shafts were designed to cripple rather than to kill. Everywhere, surgeons were cleaning and binding minor wounds.

Soon Conan and Pallantides organized the recovery. A few of the masterless horses and camels which wandered disconsolately around the camp were captured and then used to round up more of the Stygians' mounts. In the course of this work, the Aquilonians discovered the Stygians' abandoned baggage train, by which they soon made good their own losses of material.

His powers augmented by the Heart of Ahriman, the White Druid searched the spirit plane with his astral senses. He awoke from his trance to say that Thoth-Amon had fled the destruction of the Black Ring and was on his way southeast, toward the mysterious black kingdom of Zembabwei.

The host was drawn up, awaiting orders. There had been changes. Most of the horses were now wiry Stygian ponies. Their riders had put away their plate armor as too heavy for such small steeds to bear; they wore light tunics of chain mail instead. There was a newly formed camel corps, whose members looked uneasily upon their angular, irascible mounts.

Conan sat easily on his camel, his legs locked together in front of the hump. He grinned at a remark by Trocero.

"Of course I know how to ride a camel!" he chuckled. "Wasn't I once a chief of the Zuagir nomads of the eastern deserts? If you treat a camel well and know its limitations, 'tis no harder to manage than any other beast."

He stared at the distant, dun-colored horizon, his blue eyes fierce under scowling brows. Beside him, Diviatix smiled up from his mule cart. He had been drinking again, but his voice was steady enough.

"The Lords of Light are still with you, O King!" he said. He turned to where Prince Conn sat a Stygian pony. "Lend me your brand, O Prince!"

Conn handed over the sword. With his forefinger, Diviatix sketched a series of runes on the blade. The characters showed black on the bright steel.

"What's that?" asked Conn, taking back the sword and looking curiously at it.

Diviatix smiled crookedly. "Ask no question, lad. Suffice it to say that in a vision last night, one of the powers told me to write those words. It was said that they would prove of use to you. And now, farewell!"

Pallantides cantered up, reining in a restive Stygian gray. "We are ready to march, sire."

"Give the order, then," growled Conan.

"Whither away?" asked Trocero.



Conan grinned, white teeth flashing in his bronzed, impassive face. “Southeast, to Zembabwei and the jungle lands—and to the end of the earth, if need be!”

And the trumpets sang.

## RED MOON OF ZEMBABWEI

### ONE: Green Hell

Count Trocero of Poitain snatched at his saddlebow as his weary, lathered horse—a small but sturdy Stygian gray—slipped in the mud, nearly causing him to lose his stirrups. He tugged at the reins, pulling the gray’s head around, and slapped at the cloud of stinging gnats that hovered before his face. He muttered a weary curse. Behind him, Pallantides, commander of the Aquilonian host, ripped out a sulfurous oath as his steed slipped in the same patch of mud.

Trocero squinted at the cloudy sky which lay close above them. It seemed hardly to clear the tops of the tall, canelike grasses which rose to the height of a horseman’s head all about them. Below, the hooves of their horses splashed through the shallow sheet of water which lay fetlock-deep over the land. For the rainy season had come to the plains of Zembabwei, turning the country into a reeking morass.

In another fortnight the rains would cease and the water which drained sluggishly in this flatland would vanish. The soil would change to dry, hard-baked clay. The towering grasses would turn from green to yellow, dry out, and be swept by brush fires. But that lay in the future.

“Looks like rain,” Trocero grunted to Pallantides.

The general cast a grim eye aloft. “By Set’s slimy scales,” he growled, “tell me something new, Count! It’s rained every day for the last ten, and I’ve given up trying to keep the rust off my gear. How much longer will the king keep us at this back-breaking pace?”

Trocero shrugged with a saturnine grin. “You know Conan! Until it’s so black an owl couldn’t see its way. ’Ware serpent!” he snapped as his gray shied.

Pallantides jerked his reins as a mottled gray swamp viper, thick as a man’s thigh, slithered among the stems of the grasses and vanished.

“I’ve had a bellyful of this accursed swamp,” the general snorted. “Gut me on the altars of Derketo, but I wish that spindle-shanked old tosspot of a druid were still with us! Belike he could magic us through the air to Old Zembabwei. Anything were better than slogging afoot through this mire! Half our horses and camels are dead or ailing, and half our men are spilling their guts with swamp fever... How in the forty-nine hells he expects to reach the Forbidden City in shape to fight is beyond me.”

Trocero shrugged. For more than a month King Conan had driven the Aquilonian host on and on, following the course of the Styx towards its unknown source. They had trudged along the borders of eastern Stygia, where the slender ribbon of greenery along the river was flanked on either side by the golden sands of the eastern deserts. Then the river bent southward. They had traversed a parched no man’s land, where few signs of human life were to be seen save the wandering clans of the eastern Shemites, the Zuagirs, with their camels and sheep.

The host had passed beyond the bounds of Stygia and threaded its way between the kingdoms of Keshan and Punt. The desert yielded to rolling, grassy savannas, with patches of jungle in the valleys and along the streams. In southern Punt, the Styx spread out to form vast, sluggish swamps, which they had skirted for several days. Now they were approaching the borders of mysterious Zembabwei.

There had indeed been many times when Trocero could have wished that the White Druid, Diviatix, still rode with the host. A highly civilized man, the Count of Poitain put little faith in magical mummeries. But there, in the sandy wastes of demon-haunted Stygia, the drunken old druid had acquitted himself well in the battle with Thoth-Amon's wizardly warriors. He alone had saved them from entrapment by the sorcerers of the Black Ring. Now that the Black Ring was crushed and Thoth-Amon himself was fled to jungle-girt Zembabwei, far to the southeast, the count could have hoped that Conan would return to many-towered Tarantia.

But no! This time, Conan was determined to run the Stygian sorcerer to earth and extinguish, once and for all, the supernatural menace to his throne. With the help of that ancient talisman, the Heart of Ahriman, the White Druid had served them well at Nebthu. But Trocero knew why Conan had let Diviatix return to the West.

Dekanawatha, the high king or warlord of the savage Picts, had fallen in battle. His successor, Sagoyaga, was full of bloodthirsty ambitions. He planned to league all the Pictish tribes, and their neighbors the Ligureans as well, for an invasion of the westernmost Aquilonian provinces. Only the White Druid had enough influence in those wild parts to deter the Pictish chieftain from launching his attack while the king of Aquilonia was busy elsewhere.

So Diviatix had parted from the Aquilonian host as it paused to regroup along the northern borders of Stygia, preparing for Conan's thunderbolt descent into the savannas and jungles of the far South. The Heart of Ahriman had gone with him, since it had to be returned for safekeeping to the great Mitraeum in Tarantia. Conan, no wizard, could not have used it effectively, anyway.

Ere he parted from the Aquilonian host, the druid had used his supernatural powers of divination to detect the refuge whither Thoth-Amon had fled. The Stygian's northern allies, the White Hand of Hyperborea, had been crushed by the Aquilonians at Pohiola the year before. His confederates in the Far East, the Scarlet Circle, had been disorganized by the death of their master, Pra-Eun, the god-king of fabled Angkhor.

Thus there was no refuge left for Thoth-Amon save the forbidden City of Zembabwei. There his last ally, Nenaunir, the supreme wizard-priest of Damballah, ruled three million black barbarians from his skull throne. Thither, after the debacle in the ruins of Nebthu, had Thoth-Amon fled. And thither was Conan fiercely determined to follow.

## **TWO: Black-Winged Terror**

True to Trocero's prediction, the king of Aquilonia had pressed forward until darkness made it impossible to advance any further. The swift fall of the tropical night had caught them threading their way through the monstrous grasses that cloaked the boundless plain. Luckily, a nearby hummock allowed them to camp out of the far-spread sheet of shallow water. On that knoll, therefore, the army made its camp.

Cooking fires glimmered through the gloom. Fatigued Aquilonian men-at-arms cursed and grumbled, slapping insects, grooming their bedraggled mounts, and trying to dry their rotting boots. Sentries paced the margin of the swamp, exchanging curt passwords. Men sprawled, wearily scrubbing weapons and armor to keep the ever-present rust from gaining a foothold.

At the summit of the hillock rose the black tent of the king. The royal standard dropped from its pole in the steamy, motionless air.

Within, Conan stood, stripped to the waist, scrubbing mud and sweat from his mighty torso with hot water from a bronzen bowl. Moisture glistened in a thin sheen over his rippling thews.

Although the ruler of Aquilonia was in his late fifties, age and the civilized life of court and castle had softened his rugged physique but little. Time had streaked with gray the thick, square-cut mane of coarse black hair and the heavy mustache that swept out from his upper lip like bull's horns. It had given a touch of gauntness to his scarred, heavy-featured face and his neck. His skin, crisscrossed with the scars of many brawls and battles, had become leathery, with an occasional pucker of little wrinkles. But the mighty muscles of arm and shoulder and trunk were still firm, and the corded belly was still flat. He toweled himself dry while his pages set out, on a low folding table, a supper of broiled steak and coarse bread for himself and his son.

The army's supply of beer and wine had given out; so the host, including the king, was compelled to quench its thirst with swamp water. Conan insisted that the water be boiled before drinking. The aged philosopher Alcemides had told him that water so treated was less likely to carry disease. Conan had tried the system, approved it, and ordered it for his army, albeit it brought some grumbles and tapping of foreheads from his knights.

Throwing a loose cloak about his torso, Conan yawned, dismissed the pages, and attacked his simple repast. The exhausting days of plowing through scorching desert sands, hacking through jungles, and splashing across the endless, watery, reed-choked plain had not been without effect on him, even though they had tired him less than almost any man under his command. But, although physically fatigued, he was driven on by his unconquerable urge to have it out with his ancient foe.

Moreover, the wandering decades during which he had brawled and swaggered through a score of kingdoms as a footloose vagabond, thief, pirate, and mercenary soldier had given this northern barbarian a thirst for adventure and conflict which the peace of the last few years had done nothing to assuage. Thus, even when the shadow of fatigue fell upon him, he still gloried in this long trek into lands he had never seen; all the more so because the journey bade fair to end in a final confrontation with his lifelong foe.

The tent flap was twitched aside as a youth entered. Conan grunted and waved the boy to a seat across from him. "The mounts?" he inquired gruffly.

"I've groomed them. Father. But your camel tried to bite me."

"You have to learn to handle the brutes."

Prince Conn sighed. "I miss your black Ymir."

"So do I. When we get home, I'll make the Kothians and Ophireans return him, if I have to turn their kingdoms inside out."

The Aquilonians' horses had been lost at Nebthu when the Kothian and Ophirean contingents had deserted, taking the Aquilonians' mounts with them. Conan's men had been forced to use captured Stygian horses and camels after the rout of the Stygians by the Black Sphinx of Nebthu, together with some additional mounts they had bought from the Zuagirs.

Conan beamed fondly as the boy tore into the steak with his strong white teeth. Father and son clearly bore the stamp of the same lineage. The boy had the square-cut, coarse mane of straight black hair, the scowling brows, the fierce eyes of volcanic blue, and the stubborn jaw of his mighty sire. Scarce into his teens, Conn was already much taller than most Aquilonians of his own age. He still, however, lacked head and shoulder of his father's towering height.

When Conan had first led the Aquilonian army across the borders of his realm into Zingara and thence through Shem into demon-haunted Stygia, he had left his son behind in Tarantia with his family. Since the war involved a struggle against the wizards of the Black Ring, Conan urgently needed the help of the Heart of Ahriman, kept under guard in a crypt below the temple of Mitra. Hence swift messengers had been sent to Tarantia to fetch the great talisman and also to fetch Conan's heir, Prince Conn.

Conan had thereafter kept the boy near him, against all advice from his sagest councilors, who argued that the future of the dynasty should not be thus endangered. Conan felt that little was to be gained by pampering and protecting the future King of Aquilonia, except to make a weakling out of him. A future king, he firmly believed, should have the taste of battle in his guts before the heavy weight of crown responsibilities robbed him of the carefree pleasures of manslaying. Better for the next king of Aquilonia to learn of warfare in the field itself, than from dusty books and scholarly historians.

Their repast completed, the two Cimmerians were ready for rest. First, however, Conan meant to tour the camp. He would sleep better if he knew that all was secure. He did not bother to dress. Instead, he cast off his cloak and slipped a freshly-oiled mailshirt on over his half-naked torso. He donned a leathern baldric and hauled on boots, freshly cleaned and polished by his pages. As he thrust aside the tent flap and, followed by Conn, strode out into the twilight, a sudden uproar arose.

Trumpets roared; horses screamed; feet thudded. Over all sounded a strange booming sound which Conan could not identify. It reminded him, more than anything, of the boom of sails as they filled with a gusty wind—a sound familiar to him from his piratical days with the Barachan freebooters and the Zingaran buccaneers.

Just above the horizon, half obscured by damp mists, hung the pallid crescent of a sickle moon. The first stars had appeared overhead—but beneath the stars, circling and swooping to strike at running men, was a swarm of black-winged horrors. In the gathering dark they looked like a horde of monstrous, flame-eyed bats!

## THREE: From Time's Dawn

About Conan, where for a few heartbeats he stood in slackjawed amazement, a cordon of archers was posted with shafts nocked. Straight for them hurtled a black monstrosity, as big in the body as a lion, with a long, curved neck and a serpentlike head. Its elongated jaws opened to show rows of needle-sharp fangs, and its eyes burned like coals from hell.

The batlike wings of the flying demon blotted out the sky. Straight for them swooped the monster, extending clawed, birdlike feet to grasp. As one man, the Bossonian archers drew and loosed. Arrows whistled through the night air and thudded into their target. Some sank into its broad, scaly breast where heavy wing-muscles bulged with each downstroke of the vast pinions.

The monster voiced a hoarse screech and veered aside. As it did so, a human figure toppled from its back to thud on the earth almost at Conan's feet. The figure was that of a tall, muscular black in a plumed headdress, with a necklace of claws, a loincloth of monkey fur, and a leopard-skin cloak slung about his shoulders. The feathered butts of two Bossonian arrows, protruding from his rib cage, showed how he had died.

"Crom's blood, the things are tame!" roared Conan. "Shoot the riders off their backs!"

More of the dragon shapes swooped toward them, claws extended; and each carried a plumed black rider. Some of the riders hurled javelins down among the Aquilonians. A horse, disemboweled by a slash of monster claws, screamed in its death throes; a dragon, bristling with shafts, flapped heavily away from the camp, losing altitude.

Pallantides bellowed commands. Archers took up formations. Men ran to calm the terrified horses and camels.

Conan stared at the sky. He had heard of the monstrous winged reptiles in his travels. Dim legends came drifting down from the dawn of time, of an age of reptiles that had long preceded the rise of man from the beast. Elder myths and moldering tablets in age-lost cities told of such monstrosities, survivors from that forgotten age: wyverns, they were called.

Another black-winged wyvern swooped toward them, its deadly claws spread wide. Conan roared his terrible Cimmerian war cry. Catching Conn by the shoulder, with a sudden thrust he hurled the boy flat. Then, setting both hands on the hilt of his great sword, he whirled it so that its blade bit into the monster's neck, half severing it. Blood spurted, black in the moonlight; a rank reptilian stench filled the air.

The wyvern flapped its huge wings, one of which knocked Conan down. The flying reptile staggered through the air across the camp to crash into one of the campfires, scattering live coals in a shower of sparks. Its dying struggles knocked men over like tenpins. The rider on its back leaped off at the moment of impact but then went down under a shower of weapons wielded by vengeful Aquilonians.

Scrambling to his feet, Conan watched the fall of the wyvern and the death of its rider. His eyes narrowed to a slitted glare. So this was the source of the legend of the flying men of Zembabwei! Terrified travelers had hinted of a monstrous horror of elder witchcraft. They spoke of topless towers with neither door nor window. Thence came the belief that the men of the forbidden city were winged like birds.

The truth, however, was just as appalling—that the Zembabwans bred and trained these survivors of a forgotten age as their steeds. By what art the black warriors effected this marvel, Conan could not guess; but it must make them almost invincible. How could any earthbound army combat winged monsters striking from the sky?

Down from the night sky hurtled the winged monstrosities, to rip asunder man or beast and rise again on beating wings before others could rally to the rescue. The darkness baffled the skill even of the Bossonian archers. As the moon set, they could not see to aim at their foes until the latter loomed suddenly close in the ruby light of the fires.

Growling a bloody oath to his primeval Cimmerian god, the kink of Aquilonia rallied his men against these forces of darkness. Even as he bellowed commands, a booming of wings behind him and a rush of displaced air warned him of another attack. But before he could even turn, a tremendous blow caught him in the back. The extended claws of the wyvern closed upon him and snatched him from the surface of the ground.

As Conan gathered his wits and the wind tore past him, he realized with a silent curse that the force of the impact had knocked the sword from his hand. He clawed desperately at his girdle for the long poniard he usually wore at his waist, but found nothing. Alas that in his haste to check the camp's security before turning in, he had neglected to clasp about his body the broad leathern girdle—which now reposed on a folding camp stool in his tent!

Then, as he glanced at the dark ground sinking away below him, he realized that not even the dagger would have done him any good. Even if he had been able to twist his body far enough in the grip of the dragon's claws to stab the creature mortally, he was already a hundred feet above the camp. If he slew the wyvern, he would fall to his death from such a height. He thanked Crom, at least, for his shirt of ring mail, which protected his hide from the huge claws of the dragon.

From the camp, dropping beneath him, came a hoarse bellow in the voice of Amric, captain of the royal guard: "Archers, hold your shafts!"

A cry from behind him caused Conan to crane his neck to see. At the sight, he cursed again. A second wyvern was flying in tandem with the first. In its talons, like a doll borne by an eagle, was the body of Prince Conn.

"The King!" came a despairing wail from many throats below.

As the ground sank further and was lost in midst and darkness, the second wyvern drew up abreast of its fellow, affording Conan a clearer view of his son. On its back the other beast bore a black warrior, plumed and befurred, grasping the reins in one hand and a feather-tufted spear in the other.

As Conan's gaze shifted to the burden the creature carried, young Conn waved frantically to him. It was too dark to make out expressions, while the sough of rushing air and the drumming thunder of vast wings would have drowned all speech. But Conan's answering wave carried an unspoken message.

On and on they flew. Burdened by the Cimmerian's great weight, the wyvern carrying Conan seemed to have trouble maintaining altitude. A score of times it began to sink toward the darkling plain below. Every time, a sharp command from its rider and a whack of his spear shaft sent it laboring upward again.

Weary with his exertions, Conan even dozed for a time. This did not require superhuman courage; the grip of the reptile's claws, if far from comfortable, was not acutely painful. But where a lesser man might have been paralyzed with terror, Conan was sustained by a crude, fatalistic philosophy developed in his wandering years. According to his belief, when one's situation is utterly hopeless, one might as well not waste one's strength in worrying. Instead, one should leave one's fate to the gods and save one's strength for a more promising moment.

## **FOUR: The Topless Towers**

The swift waxing of the tropical dawn shining on his heavy eyelids, together with a change in the rhythm of the wyvern's laboring wings, awakened Conan. He glanced downward.

Hundreds of feet below, the grass-matted plain had given way to tropical jungle, still veiled in the purple gloom of night. On the misty horizon, the dawn lit up the sky like the blaze of a furnace. A minor river snaked its way through the thick jungle. On the inner side of one serpentine curve of this stream, the greenery had been hacked down to make room for cultivated fields. And in the midst of this tract of farmland lay a fantastic city.

All of stone it was, walled about with megalithic ramparts. Inside the wall, soaring into the ruddy glow of the dawn, rose a score of more queer, curve-walled towers, like colossal chimneys. Conan's keen gaze, raking these enigmatic structures, confirmed the legend of the towers without doors or windows. Moreover, the towers had no roofs; black emptiness yawned where their roofs would have been.

Conan felt a tingle of supernatural awe. With a sword in his strong right hand, he would fearlessly face any peril or foe. But the uncanny—the sorcerous—roused primal superstitious dread in the breast of the giant Cimmerian. The heritage of his savage ancestors awoke within him at the cold breath of the eerie and the Unknown.

His long years of wandering had carried him over much of the length and breadth of the known world. From snowy Asgard to the black kingdoms beyond Kush in the South, from the wild shores of Pictland in the West to legended Khitai in the mysterious East, he had brawled and battled and buccaneered his red road. Once, nearly twenty years before, he had briefly penetrated the kingdom of Zembabwei. He had stopped at the twin kings' northern capital to take service as a guard to a northward-bound caravan. But never had he seen the Forbidden City, Old Zembabwei, itself: a city from which foreigners were rigidly excluded.

From many mouths he had heard hints and rumors of the Forbidden City in the trackless jungles to the south. There, it was said men worshiped Set, the Old Serpent, under the name of Damballah. The black altars of Damballah ran crimson with the blood of human sacrifices. It was whispered that, on the night of sacrifice, the very moon itself burned red with the blood of those whose souls were offered up in pain and torment to the Old Serpent.

The flying wyvern descended in a slow spiral into Zembabwei. No man of the West could say for certain when this ancient city had been built. Surely it was long ago, perhaps before the advent of man on this planet. Legends hinted that the bloodsoaked cornerstone of Old Zembabwei had been laid by the uncanny serpent-men of Valusia, those children of Set and Yig and dark Han and serpent-bearded Byatis, who had ruled the quaking fens and thick fern-jungles of the prehuman world. Kull, the great hero-king, reputed founder of Conan's own race, crushed the remnants of the serpent folk, who had outlived their age to linger into the era of Atlantis and Valusia. But that was an age ago.

Such things did not matter to Conan at this grim moment. Well he knew that the uncanny city was a haunt of primal terrors and a sinkhole of the blackest sorcery. It was a fitting lair for Thoth-Amon, the devil-priest of Stygia, to crawl to in order to lick his wounds. This, Conan thought, would be the last battle.

## **FIVE: The Skull Throne**

On the height of Old Zembabwei rose the citadel, the heart of the city, ringed about with those strangely shapen and topless towers. At the summit of the hill, the royal palace and the temple of Damballah frowned at each other across a stone-paved plaza.

As the wyverns bearing Conan and Conn sank with thunderbeating wings to deposit their captives, the plaza was ringed by a host of stalwart blacks armed with iron-bladed spears and shields of rhinoceros hide. Gorgeous plumes of ostrich, ibis, flamingo, and other birds nodded from their shaven pates. The wind of the wyverns' wings whipped these plumes like a gale, and the blacks squinted against the dust thus stirred up.

The flying reptiles dropped their burdens to the stony pave and then, in obedience to their drivers' commands, rose once more into the air. They alighted on the rims of two of the doorless towers, where more blacks seized their reins and led them out of sight below the rims. As Conan climbed stiffly to his feet and helped Conn up, he realized that the mysterious towers were nought but stables for the Zembabwans' scaly flying steeds.

Conan and the boy stared about them at the motionless ranks of black warriors who watched with impassive faces like masks of cavern ebony.

"We meet again, dog of Cimmeria," said a smooth, heavy voice.

Conan turned to face the dark, burning eyes of his old enemy.

"For the last time, jackal of Stygia," he said grimly.

Thoth-Amon stood near a great throne made of human skulls mortared together with some dark, tarry substance.

The Stygian sorcerer was still a tall, powerful, commanding figure, but Conan's keen eye thought he saw signs of encroaching age in the swarthy, hawklike features of his greatest adversary. That visage was graven with many fine lines, and there was an expression of fatigue—even of exhaustion—in the droop of the firm mouth. The feverish glitter in those black eyes was unlike their usual catlike, unwinking concentration. The powerful body under the emerald-green robe seemed a little shrunken, stooped, and paunchy.

Conan wondered if Thoth-Amon's mighty powers were at last on the wane. The unnatural vitality which had for generations animated the prince of the world's black magicians seemed to have guttered low. Perhaps the dark gods he worshiped had withdrawn their support after the debacle at Nebthu, when the White Druid, with the help of the Heart of Ahriman, had broken the Black Ring. Or, perhaps, the magical powers that had so long enabled Thoth-Amon, like a few other great magicians, to hold age at bay, had at last become exhausted, and the earthly term of the sorcerer's life was at last approaching. In any case, Thoth-Amon had begun to look old.

"For the last time, you say?" came Thoth-Amon's sonorous voice, speaking Aquilonian with scarcely a trace of accent. "So be it! From this encounter, but one shall emerge alive, and that will be myself. Nor shall we fence with words. I will slay you where you stand, and your cub beside you. Your demoralized army will be scattered by the hordes of blacks that I can summon. The West shall yet fall, and Set shall again extend his beneficent rule over the earth, when I sit as emperor in Tarantia. Prepare for death!"

Then a ringing voice broke the spell of Thoth-Amon's words: "By the spawn of Damballah, Stygian, do you forget who kings it here?"

Conan raised his eyes to the Skull Throne, whose occupant he had had time to note only briefly. It was Nenaunir, wizard-king of Zembabwei, the last of Thoth-Amon's allies. Nenaunir was a towering black whose mighty-muscled breast gleamed in the ruddy rays of dawn like oiled and polished ebony. His cold eyes stared down at them like the ice from some frozen hell.

The Stygian halted, and Conan thought that he visibly paled under his dusky hue. He faltered for words, and Conan sensed a tension between the two mighty princes of black magic. A rivalry for supremacy had emerged from the smashing of the worldwide league of sorcerers which Thoth-Amon had forged with his cunning and Conan had broken with his strength.

The Stygian wilted. "I—of course, brother, you are supreme here. But... our minds hold the same great scheme of empire. You shall rule the South; I, the West.

We shall divide the world, which shall henceforth grovel before Father Set..."

"Before Lord Damballah, whose prophet and vicar on this plane I am!" thundered the majestic black. "Remember your place, Stygian. The Slithering God has forsaken you at last. Your day is done, and I see no reason to share the empire of the world with such as you. Mayhap I will appoint you regent or governor of one of the provinces my armies will carve—if you behave yourself. But walk softly! I alone will decree the death of this white devil."

The deep voice of Nenaunir, speaking the simplified Shemitish that was the trade language among the northerly black nations, ceased. A thousand blacks broke their silence to ring the butts of their spears against the stone.

In the ensuing silence, the witch-king of Zembabwei turned his icy gaze from the wasted form of Thoth-Amon to where Conan stood with arms folded calmly on his mighty breast, his young son standing brave-faced beside him.

"As for you, white dog," intoned the black king, "you have indeed erred by entering my realm. We met in Louhi's castle in Hyperborea. You won free because Louhi hesitated to have you slain, hoping to use you as a weapon against this Stygian and thus to rise to supreme command of the world's magicians. While she spun her web of guile, you won free and destroyed her. You also destroyed Thoth-Amon's power in Stygia. But I shall not repeat their errors, for I have naught to fear from the Stygian and little to gain from his friendship. I am king here, and I alone shall pronounce your doom. Think not to escape again."

Conan said nothing, but his blazing eyes boldly met the chill glare of Nenaunir.

"We shall look upon each other one last time," continued the other grimly, "on the Night of the Red Moon. When the moon turns red, your blood shall run scarlet on the altars of the Slithering God, whilst your soul goes shrieking forth to feed the hunger of Damballah."

“When is all this to take place?” asked Conan calmly.

Nenaunir turned his head. “Rimush!” he boomed.

“Aye, Your Majesty?” a small, stooped, elderly Shemite in an astrologer’s worn, patched robe, embroidered with faded symbols of his craft, stepped out of the ranks and bowed low.

“When comes the Night of the Red Moon?”

“According to my calculations, it will occur—if some god interfere not—twelve nights from the one just past, sire.”

“There is your answer, white dog. Now take them away to the pits!”

## SIX: The Pits of Zembabwei

The pits of Zembabwei were dungeon cells cut deeply into the bedrock below the ancient city. A party of black warriors escorted Conan and the boy thither through narrow, winding corridors lit only by the guttering flare of oil-soaked torches. From the curious angles and proportions of the passage, Conan guessed that the old myths were true; that it had indeed been the mysterious serpent-folk of prehuman times who had first raised the city of Old Zembabwei—or at least had laid the foundations on which the present city was built. He had seen that strangely angled masonry twice before in his long career: once in a ruined castle on the grassy plains of Kush; and again, years later, on the Nameless Isle in the uncharted Western Ocean, far to the south of the usual tracks of merchantmen, naval fleets, and piratical marauders.

The cell that Conan and his son were to share was narrow and damp. Moisture leaked from the mold-crusting walls of black, age-pitted stone. The floor was strewn with filthy, moldy straw. A large rat squeaked and scuttled out the door between the feet of the men entering the cell. The air was heavy with the stench of decay.

Into this cubicle they were thrust, and a barred grille of heavy bronze clanged shut behind them. The officer of the squad of black warriors locked the door with a great key, and the escort departed with a soft padding of naked feet.

As soon as the warriors had gone, Conan prowled the cage, searching the pitted stones of the walls with probing fingers, testing the bronze bars, green with age, with surge of his powerful thews. There was no window; the only light was a feeble one from a torch in a wall bracket at the last bend in the corridor.

Young Conn slumped in the driest corner and tried not to show his fatigue and despondency. He was also tormented by hunger and thirst; but, imitating his father, he set his face into an impassive mask of grim determination. Conan’s thirteen-year-old son would rather have gone to the stake than show fear before his sire.

Having examined the cell and found no means of exit, Conan kicked the driest straw together in a corner and stretched out with a huge yawn beside his son. He wrapped an arm around the lad for warmth and comfort.

After a little while, Conn asked: “What will they do with us, Father?”

Conan shrugged. “I know what they think to do with us, boy; but what may come to pass might be somewhat different. Remember, half the army of Aquilonia is on its way here at this very moment. I doubt not that Pallantides is pushing his men through the jungle at a pace that would slay less sturdy wights. The Night of the Red Moon is nearly a fortnight away, and much may happen ere then.”

Conn whispered: “They’re going to sacrifice us to Set, aren’t they?”

“So they think,” Conan grunted. “But it is not up to them, damn their black hides. Tis up to the gods, as the yammering priests would say—or to that shadowy Fate, which, some philosophers tell us, rules gods and mortals alike. As for me...”



“Yes, Father?”

“I dozed poorly in the claws of that wyvern-monster, and I could do with a bit of rest.” Conan yawned and stretched out his long legs.

Conn sighed and smiled a little in the darkness. It was impossible to feel fearful or gloomy for long in the presence of his father. It was not that his mighty sire was an optimist, but that he did not brood at length on dangers to come. Instead, he adjusted himself to circumstances as they arose and made the best of things, trusting to the future to bring a more favorable turn of fortune. Besides, Conan was already snoring loudly.

Conn’s head drooped on his father’s massive shoulder. Before long he, too, slept as deeply as his sire.

A deep, sepulchral groan aroused the huge Cimmerian from his exhausted slumbers. Instantly he came to full alertness, like a beast of the jungle aroused by the approach of an animal of a hostile species.

Sliding his arm out from under his son, Conan rose and glided across the cell. There he stood, listening keenly at the barred door. Again sounded that despairing groan, followed by labored breathing. At this repetition of the sound, Conn also awoke. He lay still, searching the gloom with keen young eyes. The boy had too much presence of mind to speak aloud.

From the edge of his barred door, Conan could see a little way down the corridor and into the nearest cell across the way. As his eyes fathomed the gloom, he made out the form of a gigantic black trussed to the farther wall. Stripped naked, his body striped with the weals of a recent flogging, the black hung from the wall in his chains as if crucified.

As Conan perceived these details, the sweat-smearred chest of the Negro heaved convulsively. Again he groaned, rolling back his head. The feeble torchlight from the corridor caught the whites of his eyes. From his long experience with dead and dying men, Conan surmised that this man was near the end of his strength.

“Why have they bound you thus?” Conan demanded in a low but penetrating voice, speaking first in the Shemitish trade language and then repeating his question in Kushite.

“Who speaks?” inquired the bound man in a slow, weary voice.

“A fellow prisoner. I am Conan, king of Aquilonia to the north,” replied the Cimmerian, seeing no point in deception.

“I am Mbega, king of Zembabwei,” said the crucified man.

## **SEVEN: A Tale of Two Kings**

The black had been greatly weakened by his ordeal, but Conan at length elicited his tale of treachery and devil-worship.

The black warriors of Zembabwei, it seemed, were an offshoot of the Kchaka, a black nation of the interior driven from their homes by a stronger tribe. The Zembabwan branch of the Kchaka had fled eastward until they reached the ancient, crumbling ruins of an unknown city, where they settled. The nearby tribes, holding the land to be accursed, avoided the river valley wherein lay these ruins. Hence the newcomers were able to settle undisturbed and to build a new city on the ruins of the old, which they named for their tribe, of Zembabwei.

For many years, their only foes were the wyverns who soared over the jungle from cave-lairs in a range of mountains farther east. A hero-chief of the tribe, by obtaining eggs of these creatures and rearing them in captivity, discovered that they could be tamed and trained as aerial steeds. This weapon enabled the Zembabwans to extend their rule over the neighboring tribes and form the present kingdom of Zembabwei.

The hero, Lubemba, had been one of a pair of twins and had been very close to his brother. When he announced a revelation from the gods, that the Zembabwans should henceforth be ruled by pairs of twins, so great was his prestige that none protested. Lubemba’s brother was accordingly enthroned beside him.

Ever since, the land had been ruled by twin kings. To avoid conflicts over the succession, it was the custom that when one of the pair died, the other was compelled to slay himself or he was hunted out of the country. After the end of each such dual reign, the priests chose by divination a pair of healthy twin boys from amongst the people and proclaimed them the monarchs of the next reign.

All had gone well with the young nation until the dual reign of Nenaunir and Mbega. Nenaunir had fallen in with a cult of devil-worshippers whose ancient brotherhood dated back three thousand years to the age of Acheron, kingdom of shadows. The demon-god Set, or Damballah as the Negroes called him, promised greatness to Nenaunir and his people if they would turn from their tribal gods and worship him, the Slithering God.

The conversion of the young king had torn the nation into factions, one faithful to Mbega and the old gods, the other made up of adherents of the Old Serpent and his vicar, Nenaunir. Since most of the chiefs and younger warriors had joined the new cult, there was a likelihood of bloody civil war between the factions. Rather than see the kingdom rent asunder and drowned in blood, Mbega abdicated his royal powers in favor of Nenaunir. He would have lived peacefully as just another subject had not Nenaunir embarked on a course of seizing and killing those of Mbega's faction who had been outspoken in their opposition to Nenaunir and his new god.

So Mbega and his remaining followers had risen in revolt. But this revolution, being too little and too late, aborted. The forces of the former king had been crushed in an ambush, and his sacred person had been seized.

His capture, however, had presented a problem to Nenaunir. The latter could have easily had Mbega killed, but for the law stating that when one of a pair of royal twins died, the other should be slain or driven out. Nenaunir knew that his brother still had many thousands of partisans. If necessary, these would rise to see that the old law was obeyed—the more so because Damballah's insatiable appetite for human sacrifices had destroyed much of Nenaunir's early popularity.

Nenaunir's solution was to imprison Mbega for life, bringing him out to display to the people on state occasions. This policy disarmed Mbega's faction, whose leader was held hostage by his opponent.

Nenaunir, however, wreaked an occasional private vengeance on his brother. On a recent occasion, when Mbega was taken out and paraded before the people, Nenaunir had demanded that Mbega make a speech proclaiming his allegiance to Nenaunir and urging his followers to do likewise. Instead, Mbega had defied his brother and spat in his face. Hence the flogging.

Mbega was safe for the present, Conan surmised, since Nenaunir did not yet feel strong enough on his Skull Throne to risk upsetting the ancient law of dual kingship. If he were to blind or maim Mbega, the fact could not be hidden the next time he put his captive on display.

As the crucified black related his grim narrative, he seemed to grow stronger, fires of his fury feeding his lowered vitality. Conan saw that the man was a splendid specimen of savage manhood, thewed like a gladiator. That iron physique could absorb punishment and survive where a softer, city-bred man from more civilized lands would have died long since.

"Do you still have many strong, united followers?" the Cimmerian asked.

The black king nodded. "Many are still sworn to my service, and many who were Nenaunir's men have turned against him. They have deserted him because of his cruelties, his flouting of our ancient laws, and his slaughter of their fellows in the sacrifices. Were I to escape for but an hour, I could raise an army to storm the citadel and drag the witch-king from his throne. But what use to speak of that? Our position is hopeless here."

"Time will tell," said Conan with an enigmatic smile.

## EIGHT: Through the Black Gate

Pallantides crawled through the thick grasses to the edge of the river, the stench of rotting vegetation thick in his nostrils. Wriggling like a snake, the Aquilonian general worked his way up to where Count Trocero lay peering between a pair of close-set tree trunks. The Poitanian looked back at his comrade, his sensitive, aristocratic face and pointed gray beard smeared with oily mud. Sweat ran down his face from under the brim of his light helmet and cut runnels through the grime.

“Sentries on the walls,” Trocero whispered. “Guard-posts on the towers. This will be a hard nut to crack.”

Pallantides, thoughtfully chewing his mustache, looked the scene over. The immense walls of Zembabwei were strongly built, and his practiced eye told him that it would take months of siege to force an entry. They must needs fell trees to build catapults and other siege engines... A black shadow fell upon them. The general dug himself deeper into the ferns and waited, sweating. Overhead, one of the bat-winged horrors that had attacked them in the swampy plain ten days before floated across the walls. They could see the plumed warrior mounted between the throbbing wings. A shudder of revulsion shook him.

“Blood of Dagon!” he growled. “If Nenaunir can tame those winged horrors, no wonder he holds a grip on his folk. Look yonder!”

The reptile fluttered down to one of the doorless towers and vanished out of sight over its lofty rim.

“So that’s the secret of the towers!” muttered Trocero. “That is where the wyverns go to roost, like bats in a cave!”

“To Moloch’s flames with the devils,” grunted Pallantides. “We have a king and a prince to rescue.”

“How can you be sure they are within those walls?”

“Fangs of Nergal, ’tis as plain as a mole on a dancing girl’s arse!” retorted Pallantides. “Thoth-Amon’s only ally is this Nenaunir, who kings it yonder, and the wizard’s flying devils pluck king and prince from our midst. Whither should they take them but to the capital?”

“Alive?”

“That we shall find out once we are within those walls.”

Trocero sighed. “You’ve had more experience with sieges than I; but to me those walls look impregnable.”

“To an army, yes; but not to a lone man.”

Trocero eyed the general. “You have a plan?”

The general ran a muddy hand over his stubbled jaw. “D’ye recall the Zingaran noble, Murzio?”

“That sly little turncoat? What of him?”

“Sly as a weasel in truth, but a good poniard-man and a faithful Aquilonian knight, for all that I misdoubt his patent of nobility. I think he was spawned in the gutters of Kordava; but no matter. Conan favors him because of a good turn his father did Conan in his buccaneering days. You recall that, three years since, the king invited to court his old friend Ninus ...”

“The priest of Mitra? Aye! Our king, forsooth, has some rascally old-time comrades, but none so iniquitous as that spindle-shanked old tosspot!”

Pallantides chuckled. “True enough! You know how Ninus swaggered about the court by day, as pious as a patriarch, and how by night he wallowed in the wineshops and stews. Well, he and Murzio became thick as thieves. Conan wished to employ Murzio on a spying mission and persuaded Ninus to teach him his thievish tricks. Murzio proved an apt pupil. Conan sent him to Shem, where he uncovered a budding conspiracy among the king of Ophir and some of the Shemitish kinglets. Moreover, he brought back documents and other evidence that enabled Conan to crush the plot ere it got started.

“For this, Conan knighted Murzio. These Zingarans are a treacherous lot, but whole-hearted. Win one to you, and he’s your man to the last drop of his blood; and thus it is, I pray, with this Murzio.”

“Well, what has this to do with getting into Zembabwei?”

Pallantides winked. “There’s one unguarded gate to every great city: the sewers.”

“Sewers? The jungles have addled your wits, man! A barbarous place like this would not have sewers.”

“Ah, but it has; belike they date back to prehuman times. Do you see that trickle of ooze emerging from the grill along the southwest wall?” Pallantides pointed.

“Aye.”

“To judge from the stench wafted hither on the breeze, that is the outlet for the sewers of Zembabwei. For their jakes to empty thereinto, the blacks must have built underground tunnels connecting with that underground stream—or, mayhap, used a system already there; for I suspect that this city is built on the ruins of an older one. Now, if there be one man in our army who can worm his way through that grille, it were Murzio, who is slim as an eel and thrice as slippery.”

Trocero scratched his imperial—once neatly trimmed, now shaggy and muddy—and said: “I perceive your scheme, my friend. He’ll worm his way in, knife or sandbag the guards, and unbar the gate for us in the dark of the night.”

“You have my plan in full, noble Count. And the best part of it is the sewers. It does my heart good to think of that fastidious, long-nosed Zingaran up to his nostrils in foulness. Never have I had much heart for Zingarans, since I caught a troubadour of that persuasion in bed with my wife! My late wife, I mean.”

Trocero grinned. “Let’s return to camp and inform the noble Murzio how fate has chosen him to be the savior of his king,” he chuckled.

“Oh, no you don’t!” said Pallantides. “I am fain to be the one to tell him!”

Hours later, as purple darkness spread across the walls and towers of Zembabwei, a slim, graceful figure in black slipped from the edge of the jungle and swam noiselessly across the river. At the other side, it sought the reeking rivulet that flowed from the grille beneath the frowning walls. A few strokes more brought it to that obstacle. For a moment it lingered, seeking an entrance. Then it slid within and vanished from sight.

Murzio may or may not have possessed the noble blood he claimed. But when he swore fealty to a king, he was that king’s man to the end.

## **NINE: Red Moon**

The ghostly light of the full moon shone down slantwise into the streets of Old Zembabwei. None slept in the city, for this was the Night of the Red Moon. When the ominous change passed over the heavenly orb, King Nenaunir would invoke his sinister god whose altar would run scarlet with the gore of human sacrifice even as the moon reflected that same sanguinary hue.

Torchlit processions moved through the narrow, winding streets of the ancient city. The thud of drums throbbed through the hot, black night. Weird chants arose.

In the pits of Zembabwei, Conan prowled his cell alertly, like a great cat. Prince Conn watched. He, too, had counted the days and the nights by keeping track of the number of times the prisoners were fed. The night they had broken the hosts of Stygia before the outstretched paws of the Black Sphinx of Nebthu, there had been a new moon in the sky. Nearly a month and a half—forty-one days, to be exact—had elapsed since then. Conn’s tutors had seen to it that he well knew the moon’s phases, since he would some day rule a mighty kingdom of farmers.

So tonight the moon would rise full, and his father had told him that an eclipse of the moon never occurred save on the night of the full moon.

So tonight, unless some unknown force intervened, he and his sire would die a hideous death on Damballah's black altars.

Even at this depth, the eerie throb of jungle drums came to their ears in a slow, maddening rhythm. Far above their cell, thousands of Nenaunir's savage followers were working themselves into a pitch of blood-lust for the rites that would attend the coming of the Red Moon.

Conan had more than once tested his strength against the bars of their cell, until his palms were raw. Each time, however, he had relaxed his grip, panting. His ears rang and his face was crimson with the effort. But the bars were too thick for even his superhuman strength. The builders of the cell had calculated well. Old and corroded though they were, these bars, more than an inch thick, were beyond the strength of mortal man to wrench askew.

At that instant, Conan's keen eye caught a moving shadow, it was but a glimpse—a clot of gliding darkness scarcely more substantial than a mere shadow. Conan froze, staring out into the gloomy corridor. A narrow, sallow face floated against the darkness—a familiar face.

“Sir Murzio, is't you, or do I dream?” whispered Conan.

“Tis I indeed, my liege,” replied a soft whisper.

“How in Crom's name came you here? What of the host? Are they camped nearby? And how came you by that stink?”

The Zingaran smiled wearily, his lean, fine-boned face tense with excitement. In a swift, low tone he narrated his adventures.

“But, he added in tones of despair, “the sewers leading to the streets above were mere tubes, too narrow even for me to enter. I discovered this system of passages and followed it hither; but the exits are heavily guarded. I have found you, sire; but I have failed of my mission. I cannot get to the gates to open them for the army.”

Conan digested this news. “Mayhap all is not lost,” he growled. “Have you a pick-lock? Once out of this cage, we should have at least a fighting chance.”

Murzio produced a length of bent wire and began working on the mechanism of the lock. The distant torches made the beads of perspiration of the Zingaran knight's forehead shine. For a time there was no sound save that of human breath and the faint click of metal on metal.

At last Murzio looked up, despair again overlying his features. “Father Ninus himself could not spring this lock, sire! I think it accursed.”

Conan grunted. “That may well be true. Trust the jackal of Stygia to have enchanted the lock of my cell! That crafty devil knows that I have escaped from more than one lockup. What of the lock on the cell to my left? The prisoner therein is a friend.”

The black-clad figure set to work on the lock of Mbega's cell. The chained black watched in silence with impassive features. Presently the lock clicked open. Conan released a long-pent breath in a sigh of relief.

Murzio entered Mbega's cell and soon released the dethroned king of Zembabwei from his chains. The knight helped the majestic Negro to limp out into the corridor, his slim form bent under Mbega's great weight. Conan watched in grim silence as the kingly black massaged life back into his numb extremities.

Again Murzio tried, in vain, to open the lock on Conan's cell. Again Conan essayed, with the help of the other three, to bend the bars of his cell, but without success.

“You Zembabwans build a stout cell door,” he gasped. “No matter. What cannot be cured must be endured.”

“But you face death,” said Mbega heavily.

Conan shrugged with a wolfish grin. “Not for the first time, my friend.”

“What can I do?” asked Murzio.

“First, slip me yon poniard at your belt. The blacks have stripped me nigh naked, but at least they left me my boots.” Conan slid the long blade into his right boot.

“Now help Mbega out of here. Perchance he knows a route through this maze to the surface. Help him to find haven with such of his supporters as still live. Mbega, this is your last chance. If your friends can rise before the hour of sacrifice and open the south gate to my army, we may yet outlive the dawn.

“Murzio, whether we succeed or fail, you have my thanks. You are a brave and loyal man. If we survive tonight’s perils, ask me for the barony of Castria. Fare you well! Go swiftly, and Crom and Mitrago with you.”

The two dark figures merged with the denser shadows beyond the lighted area and were gone. Conan clapped Conn’s shoulder.

“Be of good cheer, son,” he growled. “A friend within the walls is worth ten thousand locked outside them.”

He fell silent again as he heard the pad of naked feet approaching long the corridor from the other direction. He knew then that their hour was upon them—the hour that would mean either the fulfillment of Thoth-Amon’s revenge, or the fall of a kingdom.

## TEN: The Slithering One

Conan and his son were bound with massive leathern thongs and escorted from the pits by a party of black warriors. They came out into the great plaza between the palace and the temple. The silver buckler of the full moon already rode high in the sky, its brilliant light rendering the stars few and wan.

The plaza was ringed with standing stones crudely chiseled with strange glyphs in an unknown symbology. Whether this had been done by Zembabwan wizards or by their prehuman predecessors, Conan could not say.

To one side, before the temple of Damballah, a sinister idol rose against the sky. Carven of black basalt, it rose to thrice the height of a man, as tall as the sinister ring of monoliths. As Conan was led towards this eidolon, he perceived that it had been fashioned into the likeness of a tremendous serpent coiled into a conical shape. The wedge-shaped ophidian head stared down from the top of the cone. For an instant the thing seemed to live, as its scarlet eyes gleamed with cold malignancy. But then Conan saw that the eyes of the Serpent God were merely gigantic rubies, and that their lifelikeness was due to the reflection of the flickering torchlight.

Conan repressed a shudder. The idol of Set—or Damballah, as the Zembabwans called it—had from time immemorial represented the forces of darkness and evil on earth. He muttered a prayer to Crom. That aloof Cimmerian god meddled but seldom in the ways of men and cared little for worship by men. But when the demon of the Ultimate Abyss glares down with eyes of lambent scarlet flame from its height, any god is better than none.

The altar of Damballah was like a great bowl of black marble set into the pavement before the idol. Bronze rings were sunk into the marble. Conan and Conn were bound at the bottom of the depression by chains in such a fashion that they were helpless but standing upright. Their leathern thongs were removed.

Conan studied the situation. His chains and wristcuffs were of new bronze and presumably unbreakable. But the rings set in the marble looked to be centuries old and deeply eaten by corrosion.

When the captives had been tethered, the black priests of Set withdrew. Silence fell. The night wind from the jungle moaned through the circle of standing stones and made the torches flutter. The red eyes of the statue burned through the gloom with an uncanny semblance of life.

Across the square, the bowed, wasted figure of Thoth-Amon stood beside King Nenaunir. The black monarch was in full regalia, with a purple robe to his feet and his face concealed by a serpent mask. His right hand, flashing with talismanic rings, grasped his serpent-headed staff of conjuration.

The silence lengthened. Then thousands of heads turned upwards, and a long-drawn “Ah-h-h!” came from the throats of the massed Zembabwans. Conan looked up, too. A red shadow with a curved leading edge had begun to creep across the face of the moon.

The drums, which had been silent, began again, beating a complex, febrile rhythm. They thudded like a giant’s pulse. The jungle mists, curling overhead, seemed to writhe and coil in time with the beat. The jeweled eyes of the Serpent God appeared to blink and flash in time with the same throbbing. The red shadow spread further. It was time to act.

Locking his hands about the chain that secured his right wrist, Conan whipped about and threw all his weight against the chain. Ten thousand blacks watched him with bleak, indifferent eyes. Bands of muscle stood out along his shoulders, back, and arms in one great effort. The chain held, but the old ring sunk in the marble elongated and snapped.

One hand free, Conan spun, slamming his full weight against the other chain. His brows congested, knotting with effort. His eyes seemed ready to burst from their sockets; his lips drew back in a bestial snarl. The second ring, distorted, broke with a ringing crack.

At any instant now, Conan expected to feel the thudding blow of an arrow or a javelin in his back. But naught occurred. The blacks watched him free himself with stolidly indifferent faces.

With his pulse pounding in his ears, Conan turned to Conn. The red shadow crept further, the drumming changed its beat, and a booming chant arose from the massed thousands.

Emulating his father, young Conn strained at his shackles—but without effect. Conan bent to his son’s aid, conscious of a sudden arctic chill. A breath of icy wind blew against his nape. So cold was it that the sheen of perspiration on his back froze on the instant into icy granules.

Conscious of this uncanny icy breath upon him, Conan saw a strange sight. The scarlet shadow had now overspread much of the moon’s disk. But above the plaza the steamy vapors swirled, congealing from the breath of interstellar cold that blew down from the sky where the Red Moon blazed like a cyclopean eye. The vapors thickened, taking on shape and substance—the shape and substance of a tremendous, writhing serpent.

Fear clawed at Conan’s vitals. Now he knew the meaning of the bowl-shaped altar, and why they had been chained upright. As the first cold coil of the semi-solid vapor settled about him, he realized the full horror of the doom that Nenaunir had planned for them.

For Damballah himself was materializing on this earthly plane, and the coils of the Father of Evil would soon fully condense from empty air, first to crush them both to pulp and then to feed on their shuddering souls.

## **ELEVEN: Moon of Blood**

Ignoring the cold that bit through him, the giant Cimmerian threw his full strength against the last chain that bound his son to the altar. The brazen ring broke with a crack.

The insubstantial coils were heavy about Conan now. They weighed down his brawny limbs, and their interstellar cold struck deep into his hot core of vitality. With effort he bent and drew from his boot the poniard that Murzio had given him. He sank the weapon to the hilt in the thickening coils that encumbered his body.

“Father!” cried Conn, glimpsing the demonic thing that Nenaunir had conjured from transgalactic hells.

“Run, boy!” gasped Conan. “The gates! Save yourself and try to let the army in!”

Again and again, Conan drove the dagger into the massive coils. Although his stabs bit deep, they did not seem to hurt the apparition slowly solidifying about him. Scales like saucers rasped against his hide. He staggered under the incredible weight of the monstrous serpent. Far above, Damballah’s wedge-shaped head swayed against the burning moon while eyes of scarlet flame locked into his own.

A cruel, cunning, malignant intelligence lay behind those reptilian eyes; a vast weariness, an endless despair, and a bottomless hunger. Conan's soul quailed as he stared into the eyes of the demon that for a million years had striven to trample his race back into the mud from which it had slowly and painfully emerged.

The cold was bone-deep now. The weight of the shifting coils was crushing. Slowly the first coil tightened about his chest, squeezing heart and lungs as in a vise. The hand that held the poniard went numb, and the dagger fell to tinkle on the marble.

Conan fought on, but no longer was it a mere struggle of flesh with flesh. Now it was a battle of indomitable wills, pitted in a struggle of the spirit alone, on some plane of consciousness alien to Conan. It seemed to Conan that his mind, will, and soul formed an extension of his body. He threw the vigor of his unbroken will against the spiritual negativity of the serpent-demon, as he might hurl a javelin against a foe of flesh and blood.

He was no longer conscious of his body, which was benumbed from head to heel. In a dim way, he knew that he still stood upright, tangled in the tightening coils of the Great Serpent. His heart was slowing, his muscles were locked in the rigor of approaching death, and the very blood was congealing in his veins. But deep within him lay an untapped core of strength on which he drew. Into the shadowy battle of wills he threw his courage, his manhood, and his very lust for life. Against this last, the demon had no weapon, for it was a thing of death and decay; its compelling lust was to destroy all life.

But the strength of the serpent god was colossal, like the force that holds mountains erect and sustains the planet in its course. It hurled against its adversary the cold breath of fear, cowardice, and self-doubt. These were the weapons of the Abyss. With them, Damballah sapped the manhood of heroes, poisoned patriots with the venom of treachery, and drank the souls of nations and empires.

The cold intelligence of that transmundane being knew that it would in time destroy the earth and quench the fires of the very sun. Now it hurled that invincible vampiric force against a single mortal man. No living thing, however brave, could stand against the leeching power that drains the strength of suns.

Conan's mind darkened, his consciousness faded, but his sheer instinct for survival kept him fighting with every ounce of power his soul possessed. He fought on against the darkness that sucked him down into the abyss of nothingness, while the red moon leered down and King Nenaunir laughed.

## **TWELVE: Death in the Night**

Suddenly the deathly cold that numbed Conan's body lessened. The crushing pressure on his body lightened.

The exhaustion that clouded his brain faded before a surge of fresh vigor.

He came slowly to himself. He was lying on his back at the bottom of the marble bowl, staring up at friendly, twinkling stars. The moon, once again a disk of lucid silver, poured its light down upon him.

An uproar brought him to his feet, only to sink dizzily back to his knees. His full strength had not yet returned. When he could bring himself erect once more, he saw an amazing sight.

A few paces from the edge of the marble bowl lay Nenaunir, struck down in his hour of triumph. Beside him, gleaming in the moonlight, lay the poniard that Murzio had given to Conan, and which Conan had dropped in his struggle with the demon-god. Beyond, struggling in the clutches of terror-smitten blacks, stood the assassin.

It was Prince Conn, disheveled and panting. The boy glared like a beast of prey from under tousled hair. Freed from his chains by Conan's last effort, the lad had not fled as ordered. He had, instead, picked up the fallen dagger and flung himself across the square to where Nenaunir stood, eyes ablaze with blood-lust and triumph. All present were engrossed by the cosmic struggle in the black marble bowl, and none but Thoth-Amon had seen Conan's son make his suicidal charge, against the entranced wizard-king of Zembabwei.



Thoth-Amon had stayed his hand for a fatal instant of hesitation, while jealousy struggled with prudence. That second was enough; the dagger was buried in Nenaunir's heart, and the vicar of Damballah lay sprawled in his blood. The spell that sustained Damballah on the earthly plane was broken in time to rescue Conan's withering soul from extinction. Above the bowl of sacrifice, the serpent form dissolved again into formless vapor, and Conan lived.

Before the blacks who seized Conn could make up their minds whether to slay him on the spot, a howling horde of black warriors erupted from the side streets and attacked the worshipers of Damballah from all sides. The dense, orderly lines of Nenaunir's men melted into chaos, while noncombatants raced madly for safety. Leaderless, the partisans of Nenaunir, easily distinguishable by their plumed headdresses, went down by scores.

A brazen trumpet rang over the plaza, and the tramp of booted feet sounded. Conan grinned; his Aquilonians had come. He staggered through the wrack of combat and gasped out orders to his men. He saw Mbega, followed by a hundred partisans, dropping from the roof of one of the low buildings beside the square and racing into the fray with spear and ax and war-club.

Then the square resounded with a clatter of dropped spears as hundreds of Nenaunir's men threw away their weapons and groveled on the pavement, begging for mercy. Mbega rushed from group to group to stop the general slaughter.

Conan stood on half-numb legs. He staggered as Conn rushed across the square and threw himself into his father's arms. Conan hugged him briefly, spoke a gruff word of comfort, and looked around for Thoth-Amon.

The Stygian sorcerer was not to be seen. Presently a wyvern spread its batlike wings and soared out from the top of one of the towers. A swarthy man in a green robe sat astride the winged reptile. The monster circled the doomed city once, then flew off into the south. No eye but Conan's marked it in its flight. And as he watched, his brows grew together in a thoughtful scowl. South lay nothing but countless leagues of jungle, and the terminus of the continent itself, where a nameless beach fronted an unknown sea. That southernmost point of land was the edge of the known world, as far as anyone could say. Thoth-Amon had lost his final ally; he was alone, now, having lost even the favor of his merciless god. He could flee no further, Conan grimly knew. There was no place left for him to go.

Conan had been wrong, earlier. The last battle was not here among the topless towers of forbidden Zembabwei. It would be fought on a nameless beach at the World's Edge.

Hugging Conn to him, soothing his hysterical tears, Conan staggered out of the altar-bowl and stood, deeply wearied but smiling, to await the approach of Pallantides and Trocero. Before dawn reddened the eastern sky, a king would return to his throne and the last followers of the prophet and vicar of Damballah would perish. Conan would crown Mbega with his own hands; then the army must rest here in Zembabwei a while and lick its wounds, until it was restored to full fighting vigor after the long trek through swamp and jungle.

Then south—south to the World's Edge—and the final battle with Thoth-Amon.

Conan grinned, deep chest expanding, drinking in the fresh night air, feeling the blood surge through his mighty frame and the vigor well up in him again.

Crom, but it felt good to be alive!

# SHADOWS IN THE SKULL

## ONE: Visions in Smoke

A wisp of green smoke crawled from the bed of glowing coals whereon Rimush, the royal soothsayer of Zembabwei, had cast the throbbing heart of an ibis, the blood of a bull ape, and the forked tongue of an adder.

The coals shed a wavering crimson glow. This dim light turned the grim, heavy features of Conan, king of Aquilonia, into a brooding copper mask. As for the black visage of his companion, Mbega, the newly crowned king of the jungle city, the ruddy, flickering luminance transformed his features into the face of a primitive idol of polished ebony.

There was no sound in the dank, stone-walled chamber, save for the hiss and crackle of the coals and the mumblings of the gaunt old Shemitish conjurer. Rimush huddled in his worn, patched astrologer's robe, embroidered with the mystic symbols of his craft, above the brazier. The firelight gave his aged head the semblance of a white-bearded skull wherein only the deep-set eyes lived and moved.

Conan stirred restlessly. He disliked all meddling with magic and divination and witchery. His simple faith was long since given to the grim, barbaric god of his distant northern home: Crom, who made few demands upon his followers but who breathed into them the strength to slay their enemies.

"Enough of this mummerly!" he growled to Mbega. "Give me a legion of your warriors and I'll comb the jungles for Thoth-Amon myself, without wizardry!"

The giant black warningly touched Conan's shoulder, nodding at the aged astrologer. The soothsayer convulsively stiffened, champing his jaws. The whorl of green vapor climbed, eddied, and formed an arabesque the color of jade. Beads of foam appeared at the corners of Rimush's mouth.

"Any moment, now," grunted Mbega.

A whisper came from the old Shemite, in which words gradually became audible: "South...south...beating wings in the jungle night... to the great waterfall... then east, to the Land Of No Return... to the great mountains... to the Great Stone Skull..."

The whisper was cut off short as the soothsayer stiffened as if stabbed.

"You will find him at the end of the world, where the serpent-folk ruled of old, ere the coming of men," said the Shemite in a clear voice. Then he crumpled, sprawling lifelessly at the foot of the smoldering brazier.

"Crom!" growled Conan, the flesh on his corded forearms creeping.

Mbega knelt and fumbled at the old man's breast. After a moment he stood up, brow wrinkled.

"What's wrong?" demanded Conan, glimpsing a somber fear in the black monarch whom he had helped to raise to sole rulership after Zembabwei had for centuries been ruled by pairs of twins.

"Dead," said Mbega slowly. "As if struck by lightning—or as if bitten by a deadly serpent."

Pallantides was as near to open defiance of his lord as he had ever come in his many years of service to the king of Aquilonia. The old soldier cursed luridly as he struggled to rise from the silken couch whereon he lay with his left leg swathed in bandages.

"Head of Nergal, sire, I'll not have you larking off into the jungles alone without a company of stout Aquilonians at your back! Guts of Dagon, how can you trust these blacks not to break and run at the first flash of steel? Or not to roast and eat you the first time the provisions run short? If I cannot march with this damned leg I can at least ride ..."

Conan caught the general of his host by the shoulder and thrust him back on the couch.

“Crom’s blood, old friend, I like it none too well myself,” he growled. “But what is, is; and what must be, must! My Aquilonians are worn out from hacking a road through leagues of stinking jungle. Half are out of action from wounds got in taking the city, and the other half from fever and dysentery. I can wait no longer. King Mbega offers me the pick of his troops. If I stay here in Zembabwei waiting for my own lads to get back on their feet, Thoth-Amon may have crept back to his Stygian lair by then—or perchance fled to Vendhya or Khitai, or the World’s Edge, for aught I know! The old sorcerer hasn’t lost all his magic, you know. So I can wait no longer!”

“But, sire, these black savages ...”

“Are mighty warriors, Pallantides, and let none tell you otherwise!” Conan growled in irritation. “I’ve lived amongst them, fought with them, and fought against them, until they call me ‘the black king with a white skin.’ None surpasses them in manhood; my old comrade Juma could take on three of your Aquilonian knights with his bare hands and come out of it grinning. Besides, there are the Amazons.”

Pallantides grunted, too wise to argue further. Two weeks before, a company of black women warriors had appeared at the gates of Great Zembabwei to represent Queen Nzinga at the enthronement of Mbega. They were led by Nzinga’s daughter, a handsome, swaggering, full-breasted brown girl of twenty, lithe as a lioness and half a head taller than the tallest of the Aquilonians.

Pallantides knew that more than twenty years before, when Conan had been a Zingaran buccaneer, he had visited the country of the Amazons. There he had known Queen Nzinga—in all senses of the word. Pallantides also knew that Conan suspected the Amazonian princess (who bore the name Nzinga, like all the queens and heirs apparent of her line) of being his own daughter. So the general, wise in the ways of kings and knowing Conan’s temper, held his tongue.

Hearing of Conan’s plan for an expedition to the remotest regions of the unknown south, where the world came to an end, the younger Nzinga threw down her feather-tufted spear at Conan’s feet, offering herself and her woman warriors as allies. Conan had readily accepted.

“But,” said Pallantides, trying another tack, “it might be a thousand leagues ere you reach this land of no return, whereof the old astrologer told you. Even Mbega has no maps of that region, nor has any of his folk gone thither and returned to tell about it.”

Conan flashed a somber smile. “Right enough, but we’re not only marching. We shall ride the wyverns — myself, Conn, and the pick of Mbega’s royal guard. When Thoth-Amon escaped on one of the brutes, not all were turned loose; enough of the flying devils were left behind in the topless towers to bear a score of us. We’ll fly ahead on wyvern-back while Nzinga leads her war-women and Trocero commands a company of Mbega’s regular spearmen on foot. We’ll scout ahead for the best routes. When we sight this Great Stone Skull whereof the Shemite spoke, we’ll turn back, await the arrival of our ground force, and strike at once from the sky and the jungle.”

Pallantides chewed his beard. “You can’t ride those winged devils.”

Conan grinned. “I can try. I’ve ridden horses and camels and even, once, an elephant. So a mere dragon should not daunt me!”

## **TWO: A Flight of Dragons**

Conan soon learned that there was much in what Pallantides had said. The giant pterodactyls, reared and trained by the warriors of Zembabwei, were not the most tractable steeds. They were bad-tempered, quarrelsome, and stupid. They had a dismaying tendency to forget their riders and swoop down to the surface of clearings and rivers in pursuit of prey. They also stank.

Conan had snorted indignantly when the grinning black beast-keepers had tied him securely to the high-backed saddle, a stout affair of tough leather stretched over a bamboo frame. But, on his first flight, his grisly mount abruptly tumbled into a headlong dive after a fleeing gazelle. Then Conan realized the need for the thongs that held him to his seat.

The Zembabwans carried stout teakwood clubs, fastened to a loop of the saddle, wherewith to beat the wyverns into obedience whenever their predatory instincts got the better of their training. Conan battered his flying dragon into groggy flight again. He would, he thought, prefer to take his chances afoot in the jungle, with the warriors of Nzinga and Mbega.

Still, there was no denying that the wyverns moved at a speed that left those on the ground far behind. While the black fighters hacked their way through the dense growth below, Conan and his scouting force ranged far ahead, spying out the best routes. Once they sighted a black army, posting itself for an ambush of the ground force. A simultaneous swoop of the wyverns close over the heads of the hostile spearmen sent them into headlong, screaming flight.

After a time, the jungle thinned out to parkland, and the ground force speeded up. Their progress was still snail-like compared to that of the wyvern squadron, which could travel at several times the speed of even a mounted man. And there were no horses in these parts. Conan was told that they were crossing a belt in which a wasting disease slew all horses. Now and then a cluster of black specks on the savanna indicated a herd of antelope, buffalo, or other grass-eaters.

Day after day, Conan soared far ahead of his army. Then he returned to meet his ground force: Nzinga's Amazons, Mbega's warriors under Count Trocero's command, and a train of women bearing food and supplies on their heads. From his height, they looked like a column of black ants. Unable by reason of age to keep up with the brisk marching pace of the warriors, Trocero most of the time was carried in a litter borne on the shoulders of four stalwart blacks.

Each day Conan fumed with impatience when he saw how little ground the force had covered since dawn, although he well knew that these folk were marching at a rate that even his tough Aquilonian veterans would have had a hard time to keep up with.

The moon had been full the night when Conan and his son had overthrown Mbega's usurping co-king Nenaunir, who had seized sole power for himself and imprisoned his twin brother. The moon had dwindled to a silver sliver when Conan and his little army had set out in pursuit of Thoth-Amon.

During this journey, the moon twice waxed to full and shrank again to a slim silver crescent. Now it was again broadening toward the full. To Conan's right, in the west, the haze-reddened sun was sinking toward the jagged peaks that fenced the horizon. In the east, to his left, the pallid moon, in her first quarter, stood well up in the sky.

Five hundred feet below where Conan sat his wyvern, the land was rolling and rough, cut up by many ravines and gullies. It was clad in golden dry grass with patches of scrubby, thorny herbage and trees, now mostly dry, brown, leafless, and deadlooking because the country was in its dry season. Ahead, the hummocks swelled to a range of hills. From the information croaked out by old Rimush before his mysterious death, and from the words of natives queried along the way, he should be approaching the giant waterfall of which Rimush had spoken.

Ere long, his heart leaped with fierce joy as he sighted the misty plume that rose from a cleft in the hills ahead. A few more beats of the reptile's ponderous wings brought him within sight of the white glitter of the fall itself. There a small river, winding out of the hills, plunged over an escarpment half as high as Conan's own altitude.

Conan wondered whether he ought to return to the ground force, now far behind. No, he thought; he would make a cast of a few leagues eastward, as he had been directed by the Shemitish astrologer, and then swing north again. He should be able to rejoin his troops before dark.

So Conan tugged on his reins and turned the flapping monster to the left. Behind him, Prince Conn and Mbega's guardsmen followed his lead.

Conan turned, the wind whipping his gray-shot mane across his face, and peered through watering eyes to where his son rode. Young Conn was grinning. His square-jawed face was eager and his fierce blue eyes were alive and sparkling. Conan, his hard face softening, growled an affectionate curse under his breath.

The lad was obviously having the time of his life. Since he had joined the expedition at Nebthu on the River Styx, he had been through desert warfare, a jungle trek, and the siege of Zembabwei. By now he ought to have learned a few things about the task of being a warrior-king. His experience on this hazardous march into the Far South could never have been gained from tutors or books. Conan decided that he had been right to ignore the advice of his councilors and bring his son on this expedition.

By late afternoon, the craggy hills rose into bleak plateaus and rugged mountains. This must be the Land of No Return of which old Rimush had spoken. Conan meant to fly briefly over the near side of the mountains, to scout the passes, and then to turn north to rejoin Nzinga, Count Trocero, and their armies. He whacked his wyvern to hasten its flight, since he did not wish to be caught aloft by darkness and perchance miss his rendezvous with the ground force.

The thunder of vast wings sounded on his left. He glanced about to see Conn, his face flushed with excitement, reining up beside him. The lad's dragon, carrying less weight, was less fatigued than Conan's. Conn pointed ahead and to the right.

Following his son's indication, Conan peered through the haze and saw a curious thing. This was a mountain of chalkwhite stone, the lower slope of which had been rudely carved into the shape of an immense grinning death's head.

Conan's barbarian heritage of superstition rose within him, bringing a gasp of awe to his lips and a prickling of premonition to his skin. The Great Stone Skull, whereof Rimush had spoken!

Conan's blazing blue eyes stabbed through the murk. Ahead, a flat, barren strip of dead earth stretched to the foot of the cliff. There, the black arch of a portal yawned. Its lintel was carved like the fanged upper jaw of a skull. From the upper works peered two round ports, like the eye sockets of a skull. It was an eerie thing to see.

Then terror struck!

A shock ran through Conan's burly frame, leaving him gasping and trembling with unaccustomed weakness. His senses swam; his heart labored, as if he had flown into an invisible cloud of poisonous vapor.

The same weird force affected his reptilian mount. The wyvern staggered, slipped to one side, and hurtled toward the sterile plain below, where the white skull brooded starkly over a haunted, shadowy land.

## **THREE:Land of Illusions**

Conan jerked back the reins with a heave that would have broken a horse's jaw. The wyvern responded sluggishly, red eyes dimmed, snaky tail hanging limply. But respond it did, as its ribbed wings opened to catch the rushing wind and brake its headlong fall.

The groggy reptile came to earth with a thunder of batlike wings. Conan hastily untied the thongs that bound him to the saddle and sprang to the grassy ground below, shaking his head to clear his groggy wits. Had the wyvern flown through some updraft of noxious gas?

He peered aloft. The others of his scouting force had encountered the same aerial barrier. One by one, their stunned mounts tumbled from the sky. Foremost among these was Prince Conn. He dangled limply from the saddle-thongs, white face blank and senseless.

Conan's gut muscles tightened. The taste of fear was like vile brass on his tongue, oily and sour. Sweat started in cold globules from his brows as he watched his son plummet with his steed towards the ground. The aging king growled a wordless, beseeching cry, scarred fist clutching and closing helplessly on empty air.

Then the rush of clean air seemed to rouse the fainting lad; his dulled eyes took in the blurred vista of dead earth swooping up towards him, then they blazed with the unquenchable fires that flamed in the gaze of his mighty sire. Recognizing his danger in an instant, the boy flung every ounce of vigor his lithe young thews contained, jerking back the reins, snapping the winged reptile to semi-alertness even as Conan had done a moment earlier.

Relief gusted through the king of Aquilonia as he watched his son bring the reptile lurching drunkenly—but safely—to earth. He sprinted to where Conn slumped in the saddle, shaken but safe. Conan ripped loose the thongs, helped Conn to earth, and crushed the boy in a fierce, inarticulate embrace.

Not all of the aerial party were so fortunate. Two of Mbega's guardsmen failed to recover from the effects of the wizardly sky barrier. They crashed to earth with a sickening crunch of snapping bones. The rest, however, managed to bring their numbed reptiles floundering to earth, though sometimes with bone-shaking impacts.

Conan's wits sharpened as the lingering effects of the uncanny barrier faded. He became aware of something wrong. Conn sensed the strangeness, too, and pointed in wordless amazement.

From aloft they had seen a dead plain of sterile earth or sand stretching to meet the face of the white mountain which was grotesquely hewn into the likeness of a grinning skull. Now they stood knee-deep in the lush grass of a velvety meadow, spangled with small flowers, white and blue and scarlet. In the middle distance, a herd of long-horned cattle placidly cropped the herbage. The meadow sloped away up to the cliff as before.

But now that cliff presented a wholly different aspect. Conan's volcanic gaze narrowed and a tingle of supernatural awe prickled his nape. For the cliff, which from the air seemed to have been carved into the form of a skull, now appeared as the facade of a splendid, ornate palace.

Across the front of the cliff marched a row of slender pilasters. These upheld a broad architrave carved in reliefs of nymphs and satyrs and many-headed gods. From the center of this architectural mass jutted a shady portico, in back of which a tall portal led into the interior of the cliff.

Conan's face mirrored his disbelief. The burly barbarian trusted his senses; but now he wondered which was the illusion: the skull-shape seen from aloft, or the exotic, ornate splendor that now confronted him. He asked himself whether the barrier into which he had flown might not have been made of some mephitic gas, which blurred his sight or cast illusions upon his mind.

Behind him, Mbega's blacks, having recovered from the effects of the aerial barrier, were dismounting and hobbling their reptilian mounts.

Still doubtful, Conan bent to touch the swaying grasses, his massive scarred hands awkwardly gentle with the small, starchy flowers. He lifted his head, drawing the clean air deeply into his lungs. The heavy smell of perfumed flowers and of lush grass was strong in his nostrils.

He peered at the cliff. In the ruddy light of the setting sun, veins of quartz sparkled; the ornate white-marble facade was clear and distinct to his eyes. Every detail was sharp and unambiguous.

He shrugged. It may have been a zone of poisonous vapor that had stimulated fantastic visions; or else...But nothing was to be gained by standing here in speculation. Conan's bent was to resolve such puzzles not by arguing theories with himself, but by investigating the source of the enigma at first hand.

As he started forward, a sharp cry of "Angalia!" made him turn. It was Mkwawa, the officer in command of the guardsmen, pointing. Spear points came up, their blades flashing redly in the setting sun as the warriors snapped to alertness.

Figures were drifting through the pillar-fronted palace, coming toward them through the swaying grass. They were women: dusky, sinuous, with smiling red lips and eyes like black jewels. Little crystal bells were woven through the coils of their hair, so that each lithe figure was surrounded by a faintly chiming music. They were young, well formed, and thinly veiled.

Mkwawa looked a question at Conan. The king frowned, then shrugged.

"The beasts are still groggy from the bad air we flew through," he said. "Let us give them a rest ere we venture aloft again. Meanwhile, perchance we can learn something from these women, who do not seem dangerous. Tell half your men to go with me as a guard, whilst the rest care for the wyverns. Detail one man to fly back to the army, to set them on our trail."

The black officer snapped out his orders. Presently Conan, Conn, and their dozen guardsmen started for the enigmatic cliffside palace. Conan tugged the ends of his fierce mustache in thought. His face settled into an impassive bronzen mask, but inwardly he was troubled. Was this an elaborate trap? He had not lived to reach his late fifties without acquiring a strong vein of wary suspiciousness. Something, certainly, was wrong about a place that changed its entire appearance in a few heartbeats.

## FOUR: Golden Wine

It was the evening of the third day after Conan's arrival at the rock-cut palace—actually, a small cave-city. Its name, he had learned, was Yanyoga. Queen Lilit had promised the visitors a splendid feast as soon as she could make the arrangements, and the time of the feast had come.

On the marble floor of a great hall, among a select company of the queen's kinsmen and ministers, Conan sprawled on a nest of silken cushions and worked away at a horn of honey-hearted wine. The barbarian felt curiously lazy and relaxed. His belly was filled with subtly flavored viands. The golden wine was thin and cold, and through his veins it sang its heady song. To one side of the hall, Conan's black guardsmen also feasted.

Beyond, wearing his meticulously polished cuirass, young Conn sprawled on the cushions. He ogled a troop of dancing girls whose sinuous bodies wove a graceful sequence of suggestive postures. Their only garments were strings of beads about their waists and loins. Conan grinned indulgently at his son's fixed gaze but said nothing. 'Twould be only a matter of time before the lad broached his first maidenhead. Conan had not been much older when he began his roamings, in the course of which he had quickly shed the grim puritanism of a Cimmerian village.

The queen of this cavern-palace, Lilit, sat apart from her guests on an onyx dais. Although Conan had questioned her at length, she professed to know nothing of Thoth-Amon or of the skull-like appearance of the cliff as seen from the air. This land, she explained, had many geysers and fumaroles, whence noxious vapors seeped into the air from underground chambers.

That explanation, Conan thought, would have to serve for the time being, albeit his suspicions were not altogether lulled. Still, Queen Lilit, speaking the Shemish trade language current among the black nations, had told a plausible story of how she and her subjects came to be there.

A few centuries before, she said, a mighty king in Vendhya had sent forth a fleet on a trading mission to Iranistan. A typhoon had blown this fleet far off its course across the Southern Ocean, and the battered survivors had made landfall not many leagues from where they now were. They had found a race of small, yellow-skinned aborigines, whom they had enslaved and who now served them as serfs. The men of the expedition had wedded the slave girls who had been sent from Vendhya as part of the cargo. These folk and their descendants had carved Yanyoga out of the soft, chalky rock of this cliff face.

The palace, Conan thought, was really too ostentatious and exotic for his taste, for he preferred a more austere style of life. The royal palace in Tarantia, built on a magnificent scale by his unlamented predecessor Numedides, was itself too showy for his liking. From his private apartments in the palace he had long ago banished the silken draperies and carpets and the bejeweled sculptures, preferring bare stonewalls and rush-strewn floors like those he had known as a boy in his rugged Cimmerian homeland.

This place savored of those he had known in his early manhood: the palace of King Yildiz of Turan, whom he had served as a mercenary, at Aghrapur; that at Shamballah, the capital of the mysterious valley of Meru, beyond the lonely steppes of Hyrkania; and that of King Shu of Kusan, in far Khitai. Here, too, were lavishly ornamented, fantastically carven walls, columns, and lintels. Remembering his brief enslavement in Shamballah, the City of Skulls, Conan lost himself in a reverie over old times and lost comrades and distant wars. Or was the honey-flavored wine befuddling his wits?

He fell into a light doze. Thus he did not notice when Conn, after stealing a quick glance at his nodding sire, slipped from his place and quietly left the hall.

Nor did he see the gaunt, grim-faced, swarthy man who observed all with gloating eyes from the shadow of a column. This man's wasted form was swathed in faded emerald green. Although this man had, to the eye of the beholder, aged by decades since their last meeting, Conan would have known him at once as his ancient foe Thoth-Amon.

Conn was young and lusty, and his blood ran hot. One dancing girl in particular had caught his eyes. She was some years older than he, with full breasts like golden fruit and red lips ripe for kissing. Her jewel-bright gaze held his, and her gliding body was all warm animal flesh. When the dance ended, the boy observed how the girl lingered, looking back at him from the shadow of a distant pillar. Catching his eye from across the hall, she had licked her lips and run her hand over her belly and thighs in a suggestive manner.

Inwardly trembling, Conn wove through the feasters after the dancing girl. It was now or never, he thought.

He was not altogether ignorant of women. Back in Aquilonia, more than one buxom kitchen maid or serving girl had sought to catch the eye of the king's son. Beyond a few inept caresses and flustered kisses, however, none of these liaisons had culminated in what Conn, like most boys, regarded as the ultimate test of manhood. Well, this was his chance to prove his masculinity at last!

The girl was still standing in the shadow of the column.

He slid his strong young arm around her slender waist and drew her to him, trying to plant a kiss, but she laughed and eluded his efforts.

"Not here!" she breathed. "The queen..."

"Where, then?"

"Come ..."

Slipping out of his embrace but sliding her fingers into his, the girl led Conn through the entrance of the hall into the dim wilderness of corridors and chambers beyond. Without even thinking of a possible trap, since his brain teemed with images of quite another sort, the boy followed her into the darkness.

One by one, the other feasters also rose and departed, leaving Conan dozing alone on his cushions. The honey wine made a puddle on the marble floor where the great buffalo horn had fallen from his lax fingers.

Slender, swarthy serving men appeared in the almost empty hall. On silent feet they glided among the cushions abandoned by the absent feasters. The black guardsmen had left their spears and bronze battle-axes and hardwood clubs behind, not thinking to need these in the amorous encounters they expected. One by one, the serving men gathered these up, passing them out of the hall. Two went to where Conan lay snoring on his cushions. Supple hands relieved him, too, of his Aquilonian longsword and dagger.

The serving men glanced up to where Queen Lilit sat enthroned, observing all with a small, secret smile. In a sibilant, whispering language very different from that wherein they had conversed with their guests, the queen and her servants spoke. They and Conan were the only persons left in the hall.

Lilit rose and glided gracefully down the steps to where Conan sprawled, drunkenly snoring. From the servant who held the Cimmerian's weapons, she selected the long poniard. Drawing the weapon from its sheath, she smiled down at the oblivious Cimmerian.

Then, quick as the flick of a serpent's tongue, the blade flashed towards his heart.

## **FIVE: Children of the Serpent**

In the dimness of a secluded apartment, lit by a pair of flickering rushlights, Conn caught the slave girl in his arms. His hot panting kisses fell on her neck and shoulders as he forced her down upon a divan draped with silken stuffs.

Pausing above the reclining dancer, the prince cast off his girdle and tugged impatiently at the fastenings of his cuirass. This armor was a back-and-breast of highly polished steel. It was a little tight, since Conn had grown in the twelvemonth since the royal armorer had hammered it out to his measure. It was the first piece of plate armor that Conan had owned. His pride in that cuirass had led him to spend many hours, when the rest of the Aquilonian force was resting from its arduous trek, in polishing it free of any trace of rust.

While the naked girl writhed languidly, purring, on the divan, Conn at last got the straps unbuckled. He squirmed out of the cuirass. Too fond of the armor to drop it carelessly on the floor and mar its silvery surface, even in this moment of passion, he set it down carefully.



As he did, in the feeble illumination of the rushlights, he saw the reflection of the girl in the polished surface of the breastplate. And in this mirror he saw the girl as she really was.

The girl's body was still human—though less so than it had appeared to his direct vision. But atop that body, where a smiling face should have been, was a mask of spine-chilling horror. For the head of the girl was the scaled, slope-browed, wedge-shaped head of a snake, with lidless, slit-pupiled eyes, fanged jaws, and flickering, forked tongue.

Conn acted without thought. Millions of years of primitive instinct lay in the deeper, dormant layers of his mind. One look into those soulless eyes, and a thousand aeons of primordial instinct were triggered into life.

The boy sprang away from the couch to where his girdle lay. Steel rasped against leather as he tore his sword from the scabbard and sprang forward again. Light winked on the gleaming steel as Conn, white-faced with horror, drove the blade between the soft, round breasts of the serpent-woman.

He drew the sword out, dripping blood, and drove it in again and again.

The girl died, but not easily. She died in long, writhing spasms. As life ebbed, her body lost much of the human semblance it had worn. Dull gray scales took the place of warm brown skin. Conn turned his eyes away, revolted, before the final revelation. Dropping his sword with a clatter, he stumbled to a corner and was suddenly sick, in an uncontrollable spasm of revulsion.

When it was over, he felt weak but purged. His mind cleared. Now he knew what it was all about. The girl-thing had lured him outside, as others of its kind had doubtless lured away Mbega's blacks and perhaps his father as well. They had lured them into an amorous embrace, in order to open their serpentine jaws and sink envenomed fangs into their deluded would-be lovers.

Perhaps he alone had escaped the toils of this uncanny trap, all because the magical illusion could not be reproduced in a reflecting surface. This illusion was like a meticulously detailed mirage superimposed on reality.

Conn's brain reeled as he strove to understand these revelations. He knew the ancient myths of the serpent-folk. The god of the Aquilonians was Mitra the Light-Bringer, who in the legends of the West had slain Set the Old Serpent. But the reality behind the legend was older and grimmer.

It had not been the sword of an immortal god that had crushed down the Snake of Old Night, but ordinary men, battling the hissing minions of Set in a million-year war. The first men, newly sprung from their apelike forebears, had at first groveled beneath the lash of their serpentine masters. From this state of thralldom the heroes of the dawn had risen to break their shackles and to lead their people to many hard-fought victories.

The serpent-folk, the old myths whispered, had received from their father, Set, the power to becloud the minds of men, so that to human eyes they looked like ordinary human beings. Kull, the hero-king of ancient Valusia, had narrowly triumphed over the arisen serpent, when he discovered that the reptile folk were living unsuspected amidst the very cities of men.

Now, it seemed, the last survivors of this age-old war had fled the length of the world to its uttermost rim. Here, in the unknown mountains between the jungle and the sea, they had bided their time unmolested.

The boy's eyes flashed with the realization that he, alone of all men living, had guessed the secret.

## SIX: The Skull-Faced Man

“Hold!” thundered a deep voice.

Lilit’s hand was arrested in midair as the resonant command rolled through the incense-misted hall. The point of the dagger halted inches from Conan’s breast.

Queen Lilit turned to confront the gaunt, stooped figure, swathed in robes of faded and spotted emerald-green, who had interrupted her slaying of the unconscious Cimmerian. Her lips writhed back, exposing sharp white teeth. Eyes like dark gems lashed malignant fires. The pointed tip of a pink tongue flickered between her teeth.

“Who commands here, Stygian? You or I?”

Thoth-Amon faced the queen unblinkingly. Age had come upon the archimage since Conan had smashed the Black Ring in the battle at Nebthu months before. With the loss of his power base, the earth’s mightiest sorcerer had been harried south before the iron legions of Aquilonia—south to Zembabwei, where his last human ally reigned on a bloody throne.

Now the sanguinary reign of the wizard-king Nenaunir had been toppled in flame and thunder. Again Thoth-Amon fled before the Cimmerian’s vengeance. Conan had pursued him to the world’s uttermost edge.

With each defeat, Thoth-Amon’s centuries bore more heavily upon him. Now his form was old, shrunken, and frail. His face was like a skull, the dusky skin wrinkled and leathery. But still his burning gaze held terrific power; still his voice, backed by the unyielding iron of a disciplined will, was an insidious tool of persuasion.

Hither he had fled to take refuge with his last allies, the prehuman serpent-folk. For centuries he had held them pent in this southern realm. He held them back by bribe and division and magical spell; for, though he and they both worshiped mighty Set, he had no intention of letting them regain their rule over the human race. The empire of evil he dreamed of rearing over the West, he intended to rule alone.

Now, however, he had lost all his human confederates. In desperation had he sought the homeland of the serpent-folk, offering himself as an ally instead of an opponent. They had taken him in—not, he knew, from friendship or compassion, for these sentiments were alien to their kind—but to use him in rebuilding their long-vanished empire. His sovereignty over the servants of Set he had lost; but Conan of Aquilonia he was determined not to lose.

“Vengeance is mine, Lilit,” he said, his somber gaze unreadable. “In all else, I yield to you; but in this I am adamant. The Cimmerian is my captive.”

The serpent-woman eyed him obliquely. “I know your cunning heart, jackal of Stygia,” she hissed. “You think to sacrifice him to Father Set and thus, by offering the greatest champion of Mitra on earth, to regain the favored position your failures in the past have lost to you. But I, too, have plans for the Cimmerian ...”

Those plans, however, were never revealed. Even as the queen opened her mouth to utter them, she staggered from a sudden blow from behind. With unbelieving eyes, she stared down at the point of a bronze-bladed spear protruding... scarlet and dripping... from between her breasts.

Her spine arched, while her frozen features blurred and dissolved into the head of a serpent. She fell forward on the dais, writhing in slow, undulant spasms of death. Thoth-Amon turned quickly to confront the band of gigantic black women who had burst suddenly into the shadowy hall.

“By Mamajambo’s war club!” exclaimed the princess Nzinga, wrenching out the spear she had thrown. “We have come just in time!”

The gray-bearded Trocero, followed by a file of Mbega’s warriors, crowded into the hall, to see Nzinga bending over the slowly writhing body of the dying serpent-queen.

“What monstrous sorcery is this?” she demanded of him fiercely. “We see from a distance a cliff like a great skull; but when we come nigh, it changes to a gorgeous palace, and the dry soil changes to a lush meadow. Now we find the lord Conan snoring like a besotted drunkard, and this woman-thing bending over him with a knife, and an old man in green ...”

“Thoth-Amon, by all the gods!” gasped the count.

“Oh, aye?” the black girl murmured, absently, her gaze turning again to the figure that writhed slowly in its death spasms on the steps before them. “And what hell-spawned devil is this?”

Trocero’s fine features were drawn and harrowed. His voice sank to a thin whisper.

“The—snake—that—speaks!” he muttered.

The girl turned fierce eyes on him, her hand flashing to hilt of her broadsword.

“Old man, you speak of that which no man should name aloud! Can it be, though, that the old black myths were—true?”

“The proof of it lies wriggling at your feet,” the Aquilonian noble said quietly. “Look! Even as we fence with words, it... changes ...”

The Amazon girl watched as long as she could, then turned away and shut her eyes as if to blot the very memory from her mind. On the steps before them, the unthinkable monstrosity that had been a queenly, radiant, voluptuous woman, died.

And then it was that the hissing hordes fell on them, quite suddenly, from the shadows of the colonnade. And Trocero and Nzinga had work to do with spear and knife and sword, and were too busy for further speech.

In the swift succession of inexplicable events, neither the Aquilonian nobleman nor the Amazonian warrior-girl had noticed the strangest and most inexplicable of all.

For Conan and Thoth-Amon were nowhere to be seen.

Both the sprawling, unconscious Cimmerian and his sorcerous arch-enemy had vanished, as if they had melted into thin air.

## **SEVEN: At the Edge of the World**

Conan awoke suddenly from his drugged slumber. He came awake all at once, like a cat whose delicate senses have been roused to alertness by the presence of a foe. The Cimmerian had retained this savage trait through all the long years from his boyhood in the northern wastes. Decades of kingship over a sophisticated realm had laid but a thin veneer of civilization over his primitive soul.

He lay still while his keen senses tested his surroundings. To his ears came the dull boom of waves pounding a rocky shore. His nostrils tasted the air and detected the salt tang of the open sea.

Opening his eyes to slits, he saw that he lay sprawled on damp sand amidst huge boulders. Above him arched the purple skies of night, ablaze with huge stars; among these the moon, nearly full, shone like a silver shield. The moonlight silvered the billows of an unknown sea.

From a brief glance at the starry skies, Conan knew that this sea stretched away to the south. But as far as his smoldering gaze could penetrate the murk of night, he could see no land. It was as if he lay at the world’s very edge, and the shore thereof was washed by the endless seas of eternity. How had he come hither?

He rose to his feet and peered around him. Then his gaze was riveted by a figure that stood on a massive rock above him.

The man, once tall and commanding, had dwindled and become bent and shrunken. His shaven pate and strong-boned, hawklike face had been stern and kingly; now the flesh had fallen away, leaving his head as gaunt and grim as a skull. His faded, tattered green robe showed gray in the moonlight.

A hand like a withered claw clutched a talisman in the form of a carven gem against the bony breast of the silent figure. Around the middle finger of this hand was coiled a massive ring of copper, in the form of a serpent holding its tail in its jaws. Weird fires in the heart of the gem cast a flickering light on his sunken features. From sunken sockets, Thoth-Amon's dark eyes burned into Conan's, who had felt the force of these probing, uncanny orbs before.

"We meet again, dog of Cimmeria!" said Thoth-Amon in a thin voice.

"For the last time, jackal of Stygia!" growled Conan.

He had been disarmed, but the strength that slept along his massive arms and shoulders was enough to break the gaunt, bent, weary figure of his ancient foe. Conan, however, made no move against the other. He knew the powers that Thoth-Amon could command with a word, a gesture, an effort of will, and he respected these powers.

He was curious to learn why Thoth-Amon had brought him to this beach at the brink of the known world. While he lay in drugged slumber, the master-magician could easily have slain him. But he had permitted him to live and had borne him away to this unknown place with the aid of the unseen demons that still served him. Why?

As if in answer to Conan's unspoken query, Thoth-Amon began speaking slowly, in a weary, listless voice, as if the fires of life burned low in the wasted figure. As he spoke, however, his voice gained in strength, until it recalled the masterful, resonant tones of the Thoth-Amon of old. Conan listened quietly, his arms folded on his mighty breast and his mustachioed face impassive.

"You have hounded me down the length of the world, barbarian dog," said Thoth-Amon. "One by one, you have sundered from me my most powerful allies. At Nebthu, aided by that drunken fool of a druid, you broke the Black Ring and scattered the wizards of the South—even as you broke the White Hand in dank and wintry Hyperborea. By luck and fate, you toppled the throne of Nenaunir. Now there is no further realm to which I can fly for refuge."

Conan said nothing. Thoth-Amon sighed, shrugged, and continued:

"Here at the world's edge dwell the remnants of the ancient serpent-folk who ruled the world before the coming of men. The earliest human kingdoms strove with them and broke their power. When by magical illusions they sought to prolong their existence in disguise among men, your own ancestor, Kull the Conqueror, discovered their secret and crushed them once more.

"Long have I known that the last of the primal rulers of the elder world dwelt here in secret, never relinquishing their hope of regaining what they view as their rightful place in the cosmos. From them I gained the knowledge that enabled me to become vicar of Set in the West, charged with the mighty mission of overthrowing the abominable worships of Mitra and Ishtar and Asura. At the same time, I held the serpent-folk in check, knowing their insatiable ambition and having no wish to share my own rule with the children of the Serpent.

"My splendid plans you alone have thwarted—how, I know not. You are no priest or prophet or wizard. You are but a crude, ignorant, blundering, boorish adventurer, for the moment tossed high by the waves of fate. Mayhap your degenerate, effeminate Western gods have helped you in subtle ways. In any case, you have frustrated all my hopes and driven me from my throne at the center of a world-wide league of magicians, transforming the would-be conqueror of the West into a harried fugitive.

"But all is not yet lost! For unto Set himself I shall offer up your immortal soul in sacrifice. The Slithering God will feast well on the living soul of Conan the Cimmerian. Restored to his favor, I shall unleash the uncanny powers of the serpent-folk in one last, great crusade ..."

Then Conan struck. His grim features contorted into a snarling mask, he took two running steps, bounded high, and caught Thoth-Amon's scrawny throat in his massive hands. The impact of his charge hurled the pair off the rock on the other side, to fall locked together to the damp sand below.

Strange was the battle between the champion of light and the champion of darkness, as they fought at the very edge of the world under the blazing stars.

## EIGHT: Requiem for a Sorcerer

Conan's tigerish charge had taken the gaunt Stygian by surprise. Little strength remained in Thoth-Amon's withered form, and Conan should have been able to break his neck like a dry twig. The Stygian's wizardly powers, however, lent him unearthly resources. Even as Conan's fingers locked on Thoth-Amon's fragile neck, one fleshless claw struck Conan's brow with the glimmering gem that the sorcerer had clutched to his breast.

The light, feeble blow glanced from Conan's brow, but its touch was like cold fire. The Cimmerian gasped, his senses swimming as a numbing paralysis spread along his nerves. Cold waves of blackness engulfed his consciousness. It seemed to the barbarian that he sank through black waters whose bite benumbed his flesh, until his naked spirit alone rose from the vortex of nameless forces on the darkling sands.

Still was Thoth-Amon held helpless in Conan's grip. It was as though the sorcerer, too, had left his fleshly integument behind. Two impalpable spirits, locked in conflict, rose from the vortex into a dim region beyond the world. About them, mist swirled and billowed, gray and colorless. Above them, black stars burned against natural skies; the light from them was as cold as the breath of arctic winds.

To Conan it seemed that the gaunt body of the Stygian had turned into a writhing coil of vapor. His own body had become much the same: a thick, curling tendril of some fiery mist. Without limbs, they somehow clung together in bodiless combat, drifting under the gaze of the black stars.

Conan fought as never before—not with the iron grip of massive thews, but with some impalpable force within his very spirit. Perhaps it was the essence of his strength and courage and manhood that burned in his heart.

In spirit form, Thoth-Amon, too, had strength beyond that which his withered flesh possessed. His blows were like the blast of cold fires of hatred. Beneath them Conan gasped. His strength ebbed; his consciousness dimmed.

Locked in battle, the two drifted beneath the black stars, and ever the power of Thoth-Amon grew while that of Conan waned. Still the Cimmerian clung to his foe with a remorseless grip. He fought on doggedly, although he now clutched the very limits of consciousness. Blackness gathered about his dimming mind.

Then the coil of writhing vapor that was Thoth-Amon's spirit stiffened and writhed in Conan's impalpable clutch. Thoth-Amon shrieked soundlessly—an awful, hollow cry of agony and despair. The bodiless thing melted in his grasp. It disintegrated and faded into the cold mists of the void.

Conan floated for a time, panting as it were, while strength seeped back into his exhausted spirit. Somehow he knew that the life force of Thoth-Amon no longer existed.

After a time, Conan came to himself on the sandy shore by the nameless sea. A weeping boy clung to him, begging him to live. He blinked down at the dead thing that lay beneath him, still in the mechanical grip of his aching hands. Then he looked at what the boy had used, and then flung aside:

The sword, soaked to its hilt in black blood. The sword he had given to Conn for his latest birthday. The sword on whose blade, in an idle moment, the old White Druid, Diviatix, had scratched the Sign of Protection... the looped cross of Mitra, Lord of Light. . .the Cross of Life!

And thus it was that the Last Battle ended. For forty years, Conan of Cimmeria and Thoth-Amon of Stygia had faced each other across the great gaming-board of the western world. And now, at the world's edge, the long duel was over and done.

"He was killing you, Father! I didn't know what to do, so I stabbed him... And then I th-thought you were dead, you lay so still!" the boy stammered through his tears.

Conan embraced his son. "It's all right, son. I yet live, though Crom knows I was close to the Black Gates of Death. But they have opened to swallow another's soul, not mine. Look!"

He nodded at the dead man sprawled on the sands. As they watched, the years at last took their vengeance on the remains of the mightiest magician of shadow-haunted Stygia. Thoth-Amon's flesh dried, withered, and flaked away into impalpable dust, till a fleshless skull grinned up at them. Then the skull itself became cracked and pitted, while the bones beneath the empty green robe crumbled to powder.

Conan climbed to his feet, turning his back on the remains. He picked up the glimmering gem with which Thoth-Amon had struck him and pitched it far out to sea.

“So end all magical mummery!” he growled. “May it stay at the bottom of the sea for a hundred thousand years!”

## **NINE: Swords Against Shadows**

“The girl turned into a snake-headed monster and would have bitten me to death with her poison fangs,” Conn was explaining, “but I put my blade into her and she died. And when I came back into the hall to tell you, Thoth-Amon was there and the Queen was bending over you, and you were asleep. And then the Amazons came in, and the Princess threw a spear through the Queen, and she turned into a snake-thing, too. But Thoth-Amon and a servant—I couldn’t see him very well, but he had horns and was strong as a bull—carried you from the hall, and no one seemed to be able to see it except me, as if there was a spell on them that hid what was happening from their eyes.

“They took you through a secret panel behind a tapestry and down a long black tunnel cut right through the mountain. Then the other serpent-folk came pouring into the hall. I followed as soon as I could, but when I got outside under the stars I couldn’t tell where you were, because there were big rocks all around and I had to search and search... and then I found you, fighting Thoth-Amon on the sand, and it was like you were asleep, like you were fighting in your sleep...”

Conan nodded somberly, letting the boy talk it all out, while they retraced the way Conn had come. They found the entrance to the secret tunnel that led through the mountain and back into the skull-palace where the eerie powers of the serpent-folk had beclouded their minds with shadows and illusions. A distant clamor echoed faintly down the black length of the tunnel; a furious battle was being waged there in the hall of feasting.

Conan’s grim lips lightened in a huge grin, and his heart rose lustily within his burly breast. After these uncanny magical battles beyond the world, under the watchful gaze of strange black stars, it would be like food and drink to him to face a foe of flesh and blood, with clean steel in his hands!

Back there, he knew, Nzinga and her Amazons, with Trocero and the black warriors of Zembabwei, were battling the last of the serpent-people. They were few enough, Crom knew; but the Amazon girl was spoiling for a good fight, and so was he. And the serpent-folk, old and weary, had not fought mortal foes for untold ages, secure and confident in their remoteness from the lands of men.

With their Queen slain and with Thoth-Amon at last gone down to the cold hells of the unresting dead, they were few, and weaker than they might otherwise have been. No doubt it would be a good, long, hard fight, but Conan grinned at the thought of standing beside the black Amazons in one last battle against world-old foes. He glanced back briefly toward where Thoth-Amon had fallen, thinking: He was the greatest of all the foes I have overcome. I shall miss the old scoundrel, in a way.

“Do you still have your sword?” Conan growled.

“No, father, I left it on the beach.”

“Give me your dagger and go back and get it, then; I’ll wait for you here.” While the boy scampered off, Conan hunted around for a good-sized rock. He found a small, egg-shaped boulder about the size of a human skull, hard and flinty. He hefted it, a gleam of approval in his eyes. He hungered to smash in the heads of a few snake-men with it. Snakes die slow and hard, he knew. But they die at last.

Conn rejoined him, the sword gleaming in his capable young fist. Together, father and son entered the black tunnel and went to join their friends in the last battle against man’s oldest enemies.

**THE END.**

# CONAN

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