

Chronological order of the CONAN series:

CONAN

CONAN OF CIMMERIA CONAN THE FREEBOOTER CONAN THE WANDERER CONAN
THE ADVENTURER CONAN THE BUCCANEER CONAN THE WARRIOR CONAN THE
USURPER CONAN THE CONQUEROR CONAN THE AVENGER CONAN OF
AQUILONIA CONAN OF THE ISLES

CONAN

Robert E. Howard, L Sprague de Camp
and Lin Carter



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Pages 6 and 7: A map of the world of Conan in the Hyborian Age, based upon notes and sketches by Robert E. Howard and upon previous maps by P. Schuyler Miller, John D. Clark, David Kyle, and L. Sprague de Camp, with a map of Europe and adjacent regions superimposed for reference.

COVER PAINTING BY FRANK FRAZETTA

The biographical paragraphs between the stories are based upon *A Probable Outline of Conan's Career*, by P. Schuyler Miller and Dr. John D. Clark, published in *The Hyborian Age* (1938), and on the expanded version of this essay, *An Informal Biography of Conan the Cimmerian*, by P. Schuyler Miller, John D. Clark, and L. Sprague de Camp, published in *Amra*, Vol. 2, No. 4, copyright © 1959 by G. H. Scithers; used by permission of G. H. Scithers.

Introduction

Robert Ervin Howard (1906-36) was born in Peaster, Texas (not in Cross Plains, as has been written elsewhere), and spent most of his life in Cross Plains, in the center of Texas between Abilene and Brownwood. His father was a local physician, and both his parents came of pioneer stock. Howard received his main education in Cross Plains and completed his high-school career in Brownwood, at Brownwood High School and Howard Payne Academy. After taking a few courses at Brownwood College, he plunged into free-lance writing.

As a boy, Howard's precocious intellect made him something of a misfit, especially in Texas. For a time he suffered the bullying that is the usual lot of brilliant but puny boys. Partly as a result, he became a sport and exercise fanatic and an accomplished boxer and horse-man. That soon ended the bullying, especially since in maturity he was six feet tall and weighed over 200 pounds, most of it muscle. His personality was introverted, unconventional, moody, and hot-tempered, given to emotional extremes and violent likes and dislikes. Like most young writers, he read voraciously. He was a pen pal of the fantasy writers H. P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith.

During his last ten years (1927-36), Howard turned out a huge volume of general pulp-magazine fiction: sport, detective, western, historical, oriental-adventure, weird,

and ghost stories, besides his poetry and his many fan-tasies. In his late twenties he earned more money from his writings than any other man in Cross Plains, including the town banker—although that is not saying much, since during the Depression years magazine rates were low and payment often late.

Although moderately successful in his work and a big, powerful man like his heroes, Howard was maladjusted to the point of psychosis. For several years before his death, he talked of suicide. At thirty, learning that his aged mother—to whom he was excessively devoted—was on the point of death, he ended a promising literary career by shooting himself. His novella "Red Nails," a Conan story, and his interplanetary novel *Almuric* were published posthumously in *Weird Tales*.

Howard wrote several series of tales of heroic fantasy, most of them published in *Weird Tales*. Howard was a natural story-teller, whose narratives are unsurpassed for vivid, gripping, headlong action. His heroes—King Kull, Conan, Bran Mak Morn, Turlogh O'Brien, Solomon Kane—are larger than life: men of mighty thews, hot passions, and indomitable will, who easily dominate the stories through which they stride. Howard thus explained his preference for heroes of massive muscles but simple minds:

"They're simpler. You get them in a jam, and no one expects you to rack your brains inventing clever ways for them to extricate themselves. They are too stupid to do anything but cut, shoot, or slug themselves into the clear." (E. Hoffmann Price: "A Memory of R. E. Howard," in *Skull-Face and Others*, by Robert E. Howard, copyright © 1946 by August Derleth.)

Of all Howard's fantasies, the most popular have been the Conan stories. These are laid in Howard's imaginary Hyborian Age, about twelve thousand years ago, between the sinking of Atlantis and the beginning of recorded

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history. He wrote—or at least began—over two dozen Conan stories. Of these, eighteen were published during or just after his lifetime, one in a fan magazine and the rest in *Weird Tales*. Howard explained how he came to write about Conan thus:

"While I don't go so far as to believe that stories are inspired by actually existing spirits or powers (though I am rather opposed to flatly denying anything) I have some-times wondered if it were possible that unrecognized forces of the past or present—or even the future—work through the thought and actions of living men. This occurred to me when I was writing the first stories of the Conan series especially. I know that for months I had been absolutely barren of ideas, completely unable to work up anything sellable. Then the man Conan seemed suddenly to grow up in my mind without much labor on my part and immediately a stream of stories flowed off my pen—or rather off my typewriter—almost without effort on my part. I did not seem to be creating, but rather relating events that had occurred. Episode crowded on episode so fast that I could scarcely keep up with them. For weeks I did nothing but write of the adventures of Conan. The character took complete possession of my mind and crowded out everything else in the way of story-writing. When I deliberately tried to write something else, I couldn't do it. I do not attempt to explain this by esoteric or occult means, but the facts remain. I still write of Conan more powerfully and with more understanding than any of my other characters. But the time will probably come when I will suddenly find myself unable to write convincingly of him at all. This has happened in the past with nearly all my rather numerous characters; suddenly I find myself out of contact with the conception, as if the man himself had been standing at my shoulder directing my efforts, and had suddenly turned and gone away, leaving me to search for another character." (Letter to Clark

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Ashton Smith, December 14, 1933; published in *Amra*, vol. II, no. 39; copyright © 1966 by the Terminus, & Ft. Mudge Electric Street Railway Gazette.)

"It may sound fantastic to link the term 'realism' with Conan; but as a matter of fact—his superantural adventures aside—he is the most realistic character I have ever evolved. He is simply a combination of a number of men I have known, and I think that's why he seemed to step full-grown into my consciousness when I wrote the first yarn of the series. Some mechanism in my sub-consciousness took the dominant characteristics of various prize-fighters, gunmen, bootleggers, oil field bullies, gamblers, and honest workmen I had come in contact with, and combining them all, produced the amalgamation I call Conan the Cimmerian." (Letter to Clark Ashton Smith, July 23, 1935; published in *The Howard Collector*, vol. I, no. 5; copyright © 1964 by Glenn Lord; reprinted in *Amra*, vol. II, no. 39.)

During the last two decades, a large number of unpublished story manuscripts have turned up in collections of Howard's papers. These include eight Conan stories, some complete and some in the form of unfinished manuscripts, outlines, or fragments. It has been my lot to prepare most of these stories for publication, completing those that were incomplete. I have also, in collaboration with my colleagues Lin Carter and Bjorn Nyberg, written several pastiches, based upon hints in Howard's notes and letters, to fill gaps in the saga. Two of these are included in the present volume.

When the story "The God in the Bowl" appeared in manuscript in 1951, I revised it considerably for publication. For the present edition, however, I have gone back to the original manuscript and produced a version much closer to the original, with a bare minimum of editorial changes. The present volume is chronologically the first volume of the complete Conan saga.

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"Heroic fantasy" is the name I have given to a sub-genre of fiction, otherwise called the "sword-and-sorcery" story. It is a story of action and adventure laid in a more or less imaginary world, where magic works and where modern science and technology have not yet been discovered. The setting may (as in the Conan stories) be this Earth as it is conceived to have been long ago, or as it will be in the remote future, or it may be another planet or another dimension.

Such a story combines the color and dash of the historical costume romance with the atavistic supernatural thrills of the weird, occult, or ghost story. When well done, it provides the purest *fun* of fiction of any kind. It is escape fiction wherein one escapes clear out of the real world into one where all men are strong, all women beautiful, all life adventurous, and all problems simple, and nobody even mentions the income tax or the dropout problem or socialized medicine.

William Morris pioneered the heroic fantasy in Great Britain in the 1880s. In the early years of this century, Lord Dunsany and Eric R. Eddison developed the genre further. In the 1930s, the appearance of the magazines *Weird Tales* and, later, *Unknown Worlds* furnished outlets for stories of this type, and many memorable sword-and-sorcery narratives were written. These include Howard's stories of Conan, Kull, and Solomon Kane; Clark Aston Smith's macabre tales of Hyperborea, Atlantis, Averogne, and the future continent Zothique; Henry Kuttner's Atlantean stories; C. L. Moore's narratives of Jirel of Joiry; and Fritz Leiber's Gray Mouser stories. (I might also mention Fletcher Pratt's and my tales of Harold Shea.)

After the Second World War, the magazine market for stories of this kind shrank, and it looked for a while as if fantasy had become a casualty of the machine age. Then, with the publication of J. R. R. Tolkien's trilogy, *The*

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Fellowship of the Ring, and the reprinting of many earlier works in the field, the genre revived. Now it is flourishing inevitable that one of its giants—Robert E. Howard—and his greatest imaginative effort—the Conan saga—should be

L. Sprague de Camp

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CONAN

letter from *R. E. Howard to P. S. Miller*

Early in 1936, two fans of Howard's Conan stories—P. Schuyler Mitter, the educator and science-fiction writer, and Dr. John D. Clark, the chemist—worked out, from the stories that had appeared up to then, an outline of Conan's career and a map of the world in the Hyborian Age. Miller wrote Howard about the results of this research. He received a reply, written just three months before Howard's death, which sheds light on Howard's concept of Conan and of the setting for the stories:

Lock Box 313 Cross Plains, Texas March 10, 1936 Dear Mr. Miller:

I feel indeed honored that you and Dr. Clark should be so interested in Conan as to work out an outline of his career and a map of his environs. Both are surprisingly accurate, considering the vagueness of the data you had to work with. I have 'the original map—that is the one I drew up when I first started writing about Conan—around here somewhere and I'll see if I can't find it and let you have a look at it. It includes only the countries west of Vilayet and north of Kush. I've never attempted to map the southern and eastern

kingdoms, though I have a fairly clear outline of their geography in my mind. However, in writing about them I feel a certain amount of license, since the inhabitants of the western Hyborian nations were about as ignorant concerning the peoples and

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countries of the south and east as the people of medieval Europe were ignorant of Africa and Asia. In writing about the western Hyborian nations I feel confined within the limits of known and inflexible boundaries and territories, but in fictionizing the rest of the world, I feel able to give my imagination freer play. That is, having adopted a certain conception of geography and ethnology, I feel compelled to abide by it, in the interests of consistency. My conception of the east and south is not so definite or so arbitrary.

Concerning Kush, however, it is one of the black king-doms south of Stygia, the northern-most, in fact, and has given its name to the whole southern coast. Thus, when an Hyborian speaks of Kush, he is generally speaking of not the kingdom itself, one of many such kingdoms, but of the Black Coast in general. And he is likely to speak of any black man as a Kushite, whether he happens to be a Keshani, Darfari, Puntan, or Kushite proper. This is natural, since the Kushites were the first black men with whom the Hyborians came in contact—Barachan pirates trafficking with and raiding them.

As for Conan's eventual fate—frankly I can't predict it. In writing these yarns I've always felt less as creating them than as if I were simply chronicling his adventures as he told them to me. That's why they skip about so much, without following a regular order. The average adventurer, telling tales of a wild life at random, seldom follows any ordered plan, but narrates episodes widely separated by space and years, as they occur to him.

Your outline follows his career as I have visualized it pretty closely. The differences are minor. As you deduct^ Conan was about seventeen when he was introduced to the public in "The Tower of the Elephant." While not fully matured, he was riper than the average civilized youth at that age. He was born on a battle field, during a fight between his tribe and a horde of raiding Vanir. The

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country claimed by and roved over by his clan lay in the northwest of Cimmerian, but Conan was of mixed blood, although a pure-bred Cimmerian. His grandfather was a member of a southern tribe who had fled from his own people because of a blood-feud and after long wanderings, eventually taken refuge with the people of the north. He had taken part in many raids into the Hyborian nations in his youth, before his flight, and perhaps it was the tales he told of those softer countries which roused in Conan, as a child, a desire to see them. There are many things concerning Conan's life of which I am not certain myself. I do not know, for instance, when he got his first sight of civilized people. It might have been at Vanarium, or he might have made a peaceable visit to some frontier town before that. At Vanarium he was already a formidable antagonist, though only fifteen. He stood six feet and weight 180 pounds, though he lacked much of having his full growth.

There was the space of about a year between Vanarium and his entrance into the thief-city of Zamora. During this time he returned to the northern territories of his tribe, and made his first journey beyond the boundaries of Cimmeria. This, strange to say, was north instead of south. Why or how, I am not certain, but he spent some months among a tribe of the AEsir, fighting with the Vanir and the Hyperboreans, and developing a hate for the latter which lasted all his life and later affected his policies as king of Aquilonia. Captured by them, he escaped southward and came into Zamora in time to make his debut in print.

I am not sure that the adventure chronicled in "Rogues in the House" occurred in Zamora. The presence of op-posing factions of politics would seem to indicate other-wise, since Zamora was an absolute despotism where differing political opinions were not tolerated. I am of the opinion that the city was one of the small city-states

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lying just west of Zamora, and into which Conan had wandered after leaving Zamora. Shortly after this he re-turned for a brief period to Cimmeria, and there were other returns to his native land from time to time. The chronological order of his adventures is about as you have worked it out, except that they covered a little more time. Conan was about forty when he seized the crown of Aquilonia, and was about forty-four or forty-five at the time of "The Hour of the Dragon." He had no male heir at that time, because he had never bothered to formally make some woman his queen, and the sons of concubines, of which he had a goodly number, were not recognized as heirs to the throne.

He was, I think, king of Aquilonia for many years, in a turbulent and unquiet reign, when the Hyborian civilization had reached its most magnificent high-tide, and every king had imperial ambitions. At first he fought on the defensive, but I am of the opinion that at last he was forced into wars of aggression as a matter of self-preservation. Whether he succeeded in conquering a world-wide empire, or perished in the attempt, I do not know.

He travelled widely, not only before his kingship, but after he was king. He travelled to Khitai and Hyrkania, and to the even less known regions north of the latter and south of the former. He even visited a nameless continent in the western hemisphere, and roamed among the islands adjacent to it. How much of this roaming will get into print, I cannot foretell with any accuracy. I was much interested in your remarks concerning findings on the Yamal Peninsula,

the first time I had heard any-thing about that. Doubtless Conan had first-hand acquaintance with the people who evolved the culture described, or their ancestors, at least.

Hope you find "The Hyborian Age" interesting. Im enclosing a copy of the original map. Yes, Napoli's done very well with Conan, though at times he seems to give

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him a sort of Latin cast of the countenance which isn't according to type, as I conceive it. However, that isn't enough to kick about.

Hope the enclosed data answers your questions satis-factorily; I'd be delighted to discuss any other phases you might wish, or go into more details about any point of Conan's career or Hyborian history or geography you might desire. Thanks again for your interest, and best wishes, for yourself and Dr. Clark.

Cordially, Robert E. Howard

P.S. You didn't mention whether you wanted the map and chronology returned, so I'm taking the liberty or retaining them to show to some friends, if you want them back, please let me know.

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The Thing in the Crypt

The greatest hero of Hybonan times was not a Hy-borian but a barbarian, Conan the Cimmerian, about whose name whole .cycles of legend revolve. From the elder civilizations of Hyborian and Atlantean times, only a few fragmentary, half-legendary narratives sur-vive. One of these, The Nemedian Chronicles, gives most of what is known about the career of Conan. The section concerning Conan begins:

Know, O Prince, that between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis and the gleaming cities, and the years of the rise of the Sons of Aryas, there was an Age undreamed of, when shining kingdoms lay spread across the world like blue mantles beneath the stars—Nemedia, Ophir, Brythunia, Hyperborea, Zamora with its dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery, Zingara with its chivalry, Koth that bordered on the pastoral lands of Shem, Stygia with its shadow-guarded tombs, Hyrkania whose riders wore steel and silk and gold. But the proudest kingdom of the world was Aquilonia, reigning supreme in the dreaming west. Hither came Conan the Cimmerian, black-haired, sullen-eyed, sword in hand, a thief, a reaver, a slayer, with gigantic melancholies and gigantic mirth, to tread the jeweled thrones of the Earth under his sandaled feet.

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In Conan's viens flowed the blood of ancient Atlan-tis, swallowed by the seas eight thousand years before his time. He was born into a clar that claimed an trea in the northwest of Cimmeria. His grandfather was a member of a southern tribe who had fled from his own people because of a blood feud and, after long wandering, took refuge with the people of the North, Conan himself was born on a battlefield, during a fight between his tribe and a horde of raiding Vardr.

There is no record of when the young Cimmerian got his first sight of civilization, but he was known as a fighter around the council fires before he had seen fifteen snows, In that year, the Cimmerian tribesmen forgot their feuds and joined forces to repel the Gun-dermen, who had pushed across the Aquilonian fron-tier, built the frontier post of Venarium, and begun to colonize the southern marches of Cimmeria. Conan was a member of the howling, blood-mad horde that swept out of the northern hills, stormed over the stockade with sword and torch, and drove the Aqui-lonians back across their frontiers.

At the sack of Venarium, still short of his full growth, Conan already stood six feet tall and weighed ISO pounds. He had the alertness and stealth of the born woodsman, the iron-hardness of the mountain man, the Herculean physique of his blacksmith father, and a practical familiarity with knife, ax, and sword.

After the plunder of the Aquilonian outpost, Conan returns for a time to his tribe. Restless under the con-flicting urges of his adolescence, his tradition, and his times, he spends some months with a band of the /Esir in fruitless raiding against the Vanir and the Hyper-boreans. This latter campaign ends with the sixteen-year-old Cimmerian in chains. He does not, however, remain a captive long...

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1. Red Eyes

for two days the wolves had trailed him through the woods, and now they were closing in again. Looking

back over his shoulder, the boy caught glimpses of them: shaggy, hulking shapes of shadowy gray, loping amongst the black tree trunks, with eyes that burned like red coals in the gathering murk. This time, he knew, he could not fight them off as he had done before.

He could not see very far, because all around him rose, like the silent soldiers of some bewitched army, the trunks of millions of black spruces. Snow clung in dim, white patches to the northern slopes of the hills, but the gurgle of thousands of rills from melting snow and ice presaged the coming of spring. This was a dark, silent, gloomy world even in high summer; and now, as the dim light from the overcast faded with the approach of dusk, it seemed more somber than ever.

The stripling ran on, up the heavily wooded slope, as he had run for the two days since he had fought his way out of the Hyperborean slave pen. Although a purebred Cimmerian, he had been one of a band of raiding AEsir, harrying the borders of the Hyperboreans. The gaunt, blond warriors of that grim land had trapped and smashed the raiding party; and the boy Conan, for the first time in his life, had tasted the bitterness of the chains and the lash that were the normal lot of the slave.

He had not, however, long remained in slavery. Working at night while others slept, he had ground away at one link of his chain until it was weak enough for him to snap. Then, during a heavy rainstorm, he had burst loose. Whirling a four-foot length of heavy, broken chain, he had slain his overseer and a soldier who had sprung to block his way, and vanished into the downpour. The rain that hid him from sight also baffled the hounds of the search party sent after him.

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Although free for the moment, the youth had found himself with half the breadth of a hostile kingdom between him and his native Cimmeria. So he had fled south into the wild, mountainous country that separated the southern marches of Hyperborea from the fertile plains of Brythunia and the Turanian steppes. Somewhere to the south, he had heard, lay the fabulous kingdom of Zamora—Zamora with its dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery. There stood famous cities: the capital, Shadizar, called the City of Wickedness; the thief-city of Arenjun; and Yezud, the city of the spider god.

The year before, Conan had had his first taste of the luxuries of civilization when, as one of the blood-mad horde of Cimmerian clansmen that had poured over the walls of Venarium, he had taken part in the sack of that Aquilonian outpost. The taste had whetted his appetite for more. He had no clear ambition or program of action; nothing but vague dreams of desperate adventures in the rich lands of the South. Visions of glittering gold and jewels, unlimited food and drink, and the hot embraces of beautiful women of noble birth, as his prizes of valor, flitted through his naive young mind. In the South, he thought, his hulking size and strength should somehow easily bring him fame and fortune among the city-bred weaklings. So he headed south, to seek his fate with no more equipment than a tattered, threadbare tunic and a length of chain.

And then the wolves had caught his scent. Ordinarily, an active man had little to fear from wolves. But this was the end of winter; the wolves, starving after a bad season, were ready for any desperate chance.

The first time they had caught up with him, he had wielded the chain with such fury that he left one gray wolf writhing and howling in the snow with a broken back, and another dead with a smashed skull. Scarlet gore spattered the melting snow. The famished pack had slunk

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away from this fierce-eyed lad with the terrible whirling chain, to feast upon their own dead brethren instead, and young Conan had fled southward. But, ere long, they were again upon his track.

Yesterday, at sunset, they had caught up with him at a frozen river on the borders of Brythunia. He had fought them on the slippery ice, swinging the bloody chain like a flail, until the boldest wolf had seized the iron links between grim jaws, tearing the chain from his numb grasp. Then the fury of the battle and the hurtling weight of the pack had broken the rotten ice beneath them. Conan found himself gasping and choking in the icy flood. Several wolves had fallen in with him—he had a brief impression of a wolf, half immersed, scrabbling frantically with its forepaws at the edge of the ice—but how many had succeeded in scrambling out, and how many had been swept under the ice by the swift current, he never learned. Teeth chattering, he hauled himself out on the ice on the farther side, leaving the howling pack behind. All night he had fled south through the wooded hills, half-naked and half-frozen, and all this day. Now they had caught up with him again.

The cold mountain air burned in his straining lungs, until every breath was like inhaling the blast from some hellish furnace. Devoid of feeling, his leaden legs moved like pistons. With each stride, his sandaled feet sank into the water-soaked earth and came out again with sucking sounds.

He knew that, bare-handed, he stood little chance against a dozen shaggy man-killers. Yet he trotted on without pausing. His grim Cimmerian heritage would not let him give up, even in the face of certain death.

Snow was falling again—big, wet flakes that struck with a faint but audible hiss and spotted the wet, black earth

and the towering black spruces with a myriad dots of white. Here and there, great boulders shouldered out of

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the needle-carpeted earth; the land was growing ever more rocky and mountainous. And herein, thought Conan, might lie his one chance for life. He could take a stand with his back against a rock and fight the wolves off as they came at him. It was a slim chance—he well knew the steel-trap quickness of those lean, wiry, hundred-pound bodies—but better than none.

The woods thinned out as the slope grew steeper. Conan loped toward a huge mass of rocks that jutted from the hillside, like the entrance to a buried castle. As he did so, the wolves broke from the edge of the thick woods and raced after him, howling like the scarlet demons of Hell as they track and pull down a doomed soul.

2. *The Door in the Rock*

Through the white blur of whirling snow, the boy saw a yawning blackness between two mighty planes of rock and flung himself toward it. The wolves were upon his heels—he thought he could feel their hot, reeking breath upon his bare legs—when he hurled himself into the black cleft that gaped before him. He squeezed through the opening just as the foremost wolf sprang at him. Drooling jaws snapped on empty air; Conan was safe.

But for how long?

Stooping, Conan fumbled about in the dark, pawing the rough stone floor as he sought for any loose object with which to fight off the howling horde. He could hear them padding about in the fresh snow outside, their claws scraping on stone. Like himself, they breathed in quick pants. They snuffled and whined, hungry for blood. But not one came through the doorway, a dim, gray slit against the blackness. And that was strange.

Conan found himself in a narrow chamber in the rock, utterly black save for the feeble twilight that came through the cleft. The uneven floor of the cell was strewn with

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litter blown in by centuries of wind or carried in by birds and beasts: dead leaves, spruce needles, twigs, a few scattered bones, pebbles, and chips of rock. There was nothing in all this trash that he could use for a weapon.

Stretching to his full height—already inches over six feet—the boy began exploring the wall with outstretched hand. Soon he came upon another door. As he groped his way through this portal into pitch-blackness, his questing fingers told him that here were chisel marks on the stone, forming cryptic glyphs in some unknown writing. Un-known, at least, to the, untutored boy from the barbarous northlands, who could neither read nor write and who scorned such civilized skills as effeminate.

He had to stoop double to wedge himself through the inner door, but beyond it he could once more stand erect. He paused, listening warily. Although the silence was absolute, some sense seemed to warn him that he was not alone in the chamber. It was nothing he could see, hear, or smell, but a sense of *presence*, different from any of these.

His sensitive, forest-trained ears, listening for echoes, told him that this inner chamber was much larger than the outer one. The place smelt of ancient dust and bats' droppings. His shuffling feet encountered things scattered about the floor. While he could not see these objects, they did not feel like the forest litter that carpeted the ante-chamber. They felt more like man-made things.

As he took a quick step along the wall, he stumbled over one such object in the dark. As he fell, the thing splintered with a crash beneath his weight. A snag of broken wood scraped his shin, adding one more scratch to those of the spruce boughs and the wolves' claws. Cursing, he recovered himself and felt in the dark for the thing he had demolished. It was a chair, the wood of which had rotted so that it easily broke beneath his weight.

He continued his explorations more cautiously. His

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groping hands met another, larger object, which he presently recognized as the body of a chariot. The wheels had collapsed with the rotting of their spokes, so that the body lay on the floor amid the fragments of spokes and pieces of the rims.

Conan's questing hands came upon something cold and metallic. His sense of touch told him that this was probably a rusty iron fitting from the chariot. This gave him an idea. Turning, he groped his way back to the inner portal, which he could barely discern against the all-pervading blackness. From the floor of the antechamber he gathered a fistful of tinder and several stone chips. Back in the inner chamber, he made a pile of the tinder and tried

the stones on the iron. After several failures, he found a stone that emitted a bright flash of sparks when struck against the iron.

Soon he had a small, smoky fire sputtering, which he fed with the broken rungs of the chair and the fragments of the chariot wheels. Now he could relax, rest from his terrible cross-country run, and warm his numbed limbs. The briskly burning blaze would deter the wolves, which still prowled about the outer entrance, reluctant to pursue him into the darkness of the cave but also unwilling to give up their quarry.

The fire sent a warm, yellow light dancing across the walls of roughly dressed stone. Conan gazed about him. The room was square and even larger than his first impressions had told him. The high ceiling was lost in thick shadows and clotted with cobwebs. Several other chairs were set against the walls, together with a couple of chests that had burst open to show their contents of clothing and weapons. The great stone room smelt of death—of ancient things long unburied.

And then the hair lifted from the nape of his neck, and the boy felt his skin roughen with a supernatural thrill. For there, enthroned on a great, stone chair at the further end

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of the chamber, sat the huge figure of a naked man, with a naked sword across his knees and a cavernous skull-face staring at him through the flickering firelight.

Almost as soon as he sighted the naked giant, Conan knew he was dead—long ages dead. The corpse's limbs were as brown and withered as dry sticks. The flesh on its huge torso had dried, shrunk, and split until it clung *in* tatters to naked ribs.

This knowledge, however, did not calm the youth's sud-den chill of terror. Fearless beyond his years in war, willing to stand against man or brute beast in battle, the boy feared neither pain, nor death, nor mortal foes. But he was a barbarian from the northern hills of backward Cim-meria. Like all barbarians, he dreaded the supernatural terrors of the grave and the dark, with all its dreads and demons and the monstrous, shambling things of Old Night and Chaos, with which primitive folk people the darkness beyond the circle of their campfire. Much rather would Conan have faced even the hungry wolves than remain here with the dead thing glaring down at him from its rocky throne, while the wavering firelight painted life and animation into the withered skull-face and moved the shadows in its sunken sockets like dark, burning eyes.

3. *The Thing on the Throne*

Although his blood ran chill and his nape hairs prickled, the boy fiercely took hold of himself. Bidding his night-fears be damned, he strode stiff-legged across the vault for a closer look at the long-dead thing.

The throne was a square boulder of glassy, black stone, roughly hollowed into the likeness of a chair on a foot-high dais. The naked man had either died while sitting in it or had been placed upon it in a sitting position after his death. Whatever garments he had worn had long since mouldered away to fragments. Bronze buckles and

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scraps of leather from his harness still lay about his feet. A necklace of unshaped nuggets of gold hung about his neck; uncut gems winked from golden rings on his claw-like hands, which still clasped the arms of the throne. A horned helm of bronze, now covered with a green, waxy coating of verdegriis, crowned the pate above the withered, brown horror of the face.

With iron nerve, Conan forced himself to peer into those time-eaten features. The eyes had sunken in, leaving two black pits. Skin had peeled back from dried lips, letting the yellow fangs grin in a mirthless leer.

Who had he been, this dead thing? A warrior of ancient times—some great chief, feared in life and still enthroned in death? None could say. A hundred races had roved and ruled these mountainous borderlands since Atlantis sank beneath the emerald waves of the Western Ocean, eight thousand years before. From the horned helm, the cadaver might have been a chief of the primal Vanir or AEsir, or the primitive king of some forgotten Hyborian tribe, long since vanished into the shadows of time and buried under the dust of ages.

Then Conan's gaze dropped to the great sword that lay across the corpse's bony thighs. It was a terrific weapon: a broadsword with a blade well over a yard in length. It was made of blued iron—not copper or bronze, as might have been expected from its obvious age. It might have been one of the first iron weapons borne by the hand of man; the legends of Conan's people remembered the days when men hewed and thrust with ruddy bronze, and the fabrication of iron was unknown. Many battles had this sword seen in the dim past, for its broad blade, although still keen, was notched in a score of places where, clanging, it had met other blades of sword and ax in the slash and parry of the melee. Stained with age and spotted with rust, it was still a weapon to be feared.

The boy felt his pulses pound. The blood of one born to war seethed within him. Crom, what a sword! With a blade like that, he could more than hold his own against the starving wolves that padded, whined, and waited without. As he reached for the hilt with eager hand, he failed to see the warning flicker that moved within those shadowed eye sockets in the skull-head of the ancient warrior.

Conan hefted the blade. It seemed as heavy as lead—a sword of the Elder Ages. Perhaps some fabled hero-king of old had borne it—some legendary demigod like Kail of Atlantis, king of Valusia in the ages before Atlantis found-ered beneath the restless sea ...

The boy swung the sword, feeling his thews swell with power and his heart beat faster with pride of possession. Gods, what a sword! With such a blade, no destiny was too high for a warrior to aspire to! With a sword such as this, even a half-naked young barbarian from the raw Cimmerian wilderness might hack his way across the world and wade through rivers of gore to a place among the high kings of earth!

He stood back from the throne of stone, feinting and cutting the air with the blade, getting the feel of the age-worn hilt against his hard palm. The keen old sword whistled through the smoky air, and the flickering light of the fire glanced in sparkling rays from the planes of the blade to the rough stone walls, whipping along the sides of the chamber like little, golden meteors. With this mighty brand in his grasp, he could face not only the hungry wolves outside but a world of warriors as well.

The boy expanded his chest and boomed out the sav-age war cry of his folk. The echoes of that cry thunder-ously reverberated about the chamber, disturbing ancient shadows and old dust. Conan never paused to think that such a challenge, in such a place, might rouse things other than shadows and dust—things that by all rights should

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have slumbered without interruption through all future eons.

He stopped, frozen in mid-stride, as a sound—an inde-scribable, dry creaking—came from the throne side of the crypt. Wheeling, he saw . . . and felt the hair lift from his scalp and the blood turn to ice in his veins. All his superstitious terrors and primal night-fears rose howling, to fill his mind with shadows of madness and horror. For the dead thing lived.

4. *When Dead Men Walk*

Slowly, jerkily, the cadaver rose from its great stone chair and glared at him from its black pits, whence now living eyes seemed to blaze forth with a coldly malignant stare. Somehow—by what primeval necromancy the boy Conan could not guess—life still animated the withered mummy of the long-dead chief. Grinning jaws moved open and shut in a fearful pantomime of speech. But the only sound was the creaking that Conan had heard, as if the shriveled remains of muscles and tendons rubbed dryly together. To Conan, this silent imitation of speech was more terrible than the fact that the dead man lived and moved.

Creaking, the mummy stepped down from the dais of its ancient throne and swiveled its skull in Conan's di-rection. As its eyeless gaze fixed itself on the sword in Conan's hand, lurid witch fires burned within the hollow sockets. Stalking clumsily across the chamber, the mummy advanced upon Conan like a shape of nameless horror from the nightmares of a mad fiend. It extended its bony claws to snatch the sword from Conan's strong young hands.

Numb with superstitious terror, Conan retreated step by step. The firelight painted the mummy's black, monstrous

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shadow on the wall behind it. The shadow rippled over the rough stone. Save for the crackle of the flames as they bit into the pieces of ancient furniture with which Conan had fed the fire, the rustle and creak of the cadaver's leathery muscles as they propelled it step by faltering step across the crypt, and the panting breath of the youth as he struggled for air in the grip of terror—save for these sounds, the tomb was silent.

Now the dead thing had Conan backed against a wall. One brown claw stretched jerkily out. The boy's reaction was automatic; instinctively, he struck out. The blade whistled and smote the outstretched arm, which cracked like a broken stick. Still clutching at empty air, the severed hand fell with a dry clack to the floor; no blood spurted from the dry stump of the forearm.

The terrible wound, which would have stopped any living warrior, did not even slow the walking corpse. It merely withdrew the stump of the maimed arm and ex-tended the other.

Wildly, Conan burst from the wall, swinging his blade in great, smashing strokes. One blow caught the mummy in the side. Ribs snapped like twigs under the impact, and the cadaver was hurled off its feet with a clatter. Conan stood panting in the center of the room clutching the worn hilt in a sweaty palm. With widened eyes he watched as slowly, creakily, the mummy dragged itself to its feet again and began mechanically shuffling toward him, its remaining claw extended.

5. *Duel With the Dead*

Around and around they went, circling slowly. Conan swung lustily but retreated step by step before the un-stoppable advance of the dead thing that came on and on.

A blow at its remaining arm missed as the mummy

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jerked the member out of the path of the sword; the impetus swung Conan half around and, before he could recover, it was almost upon him. Its claw-hand snatched at him, caught a fold of his tunic, and ripped the rotten cloth from his body, leaving him naked except for sandals and loincloth.

Conan danced back and swung at the monster's head. The mummy ducked, and again Conan had to

scramble to keep out of its grip. At last he caught it a terrific blow on the side of the head, shearing off one horn of the helm. Another blow sent the helmet itself clanging into a corner. Another bit into the dry, brown skull. The blade stuck for an instant—an instant that almost undid the boy, whose skin was scraped by ancient black nails as he frantically tugged his weapon loose.

The sword caught the mummy in the ribs again, lodged for a nearly fatal second in the spine, and then was jerked loose once more. Nothing, it seemed, could stop it. Dead, it could not be hurt. Always it staggered and shuffled toward him, untiring and unfaltering, even though its body bore wounds that would have kid a dozen stout warriors moaning in the dirt.

How can you kill a thing that is already dead? The question echoed madly in Conan's brain. It went round and round until he thought he would go mad with the repetition of it. His lungs labored; his heart pounded as if it were about to burst. Slash and strike as he would, nothing could even slow the dead thing that shuffled after him.

Now he struck with greater cunning. Reasoning that if it could not walk it could not pursue him, he drove a fierce, back-handed slash against the mummy's knee. A bone cracked, and the mummy collapsed, groveling in the dust of the cavern floor. But still the unnatural life burned within the mummy's withered breast. It staggered to its

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feet again and lurched after the boy, dragging its crippled leg behind it.

Again Conan struck, and the dead thing's lower face was shorn away; the jawbone went rattling off into the shadows. But the cadaver never stopped. With its lower face a mere expanse of broken white bone beneath the uncanny glow in its eye sockets, it still shambled after its antagonist in tireless, mechanical pursuit. Conan began to wish he had stayed outside with the wolves rather than sought shelter in this cursed crypt, where things that should have died a thousand years ago still stalked and slew.

Then something caught his ankle. Off balance, he fell full-length to the rough stone floor, kicking wildly to free his leg from that bony grip. He stared down and felt his blood freeze when he saw the severed hand of the corpse clutching his foot. Its bony claws bit into his flesh.

Then a grisly shape of nightmare horror and lunacy loomed over him. The broken, mangled face of the corpse leered down into his, and one claw-hand darted towards his throat.

Conan reacted by instinct. With all his might, he brought both sandaled feet up against the shrunken belly of the dead thing stooping over him. Hurling into the air, it fell with a crash behind him, right in the fire.

Then Conan snatched at the severed hand, which still gripped his ankle. He tore it loose, rolled to his feet, and hurled the member into the fire after the rest of the mummy. He stopped to snatch up his sword and whirled back toward the fire—to find the battle over.

Desiccated by the passage of countless centuries, the mummy burned with the fury of dry brushwood. The un-natural life within it still flickered as it struggled erect, while flames ran up its withered form, leaping from limb to limb and converting it into a living torch. It had almost

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clambered out of the fire when its crippled leg gave way, and it collapsed in a mass of roaring flame. One blazing arm dropped off like a twitching stick. The skull rolled through the coals. Within minutes the mummy was utterly consumed, but for a few glowing coals of blackened bone.

6. *The Sword of Conan*

Conan let out his breath with a long sigh and breathed; deeply once again. The tension drained out of him, leaving him weary in every limb. He wiped the cold sweat of terror from his face and combed back the tangle of his black hair with his fingers. The dead warrior's mummy was at last truly dead, and the great sword was his. He hefted it again, relishing its weight and power.

For an instant he thought of spending the night in the tomb. He was deathly tired. Outside, the wolves and the cold waited to bring him down, and not even his wilderness-bred sense of direction could keep him on his chosen course on a starless night in a strange land.

But then revulsion seized him. The smoke-filled chamber stank, now, not only of the dust of ages but also of the burning of long-dead human flesh—a strange odor, like nothing Conan's keen nostrils had ever detected before, and altogether revolting. The empty throne seemed to leer at him. That sense of presence that had struck him when he first entered the inner chamber still lingered in his mind. His scalp crawled and his skin prickled when he thought of sleeping in this haunted chamber.

Besides, with his new sword, he was filled with confidence. His chest expanded, and he swung the

blade in whistling circles.

Moments later, wrapped in an old fur cloak from one of the chests and holding a torch in one hand and the

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sword in the other, he emerged from the cave. There was no sign of the wolves. A glance upward showed that the sky was clearing. Conan studied the stars that glimmered between patches of cloud, then once more set his foot-steps to southward.

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The City of Skulls

Conan remains in Turanian service for about two years, becoming an expert horseman and archer and traveling over the immense deserts, mountains, and jungles of Hyrkania, as far as the borders of Khitai. One such journey takes him to the fabled kingdom of Mem, a comparatively unknown land between Vendhya to the south, Hyrkania to the north and west, and Khitai to the east.

1. Red Snow

howling like wolves, a horde of squat, brown warriors swept down upon the Turanian troop from the foothills of the Talakma Mountains, where the hills flattened out into the broad, barren steppes of Hyrkania. The attack came at sunset. The western horizon streamed with scarlet banners, while to the south the invisible sun tinged the snows of the higher peaks with red.

For fifteen days, the escort of Turanians had jogged across the plain, fording the chill waters of the Zaporoska River, venturing deeper and ever deeper into the illimitable distances of the East. Then, without warning, came the attack.

Conan caught the body of Hormaz as the lieutenant slumped from his horse, a quivering, black-feathered arrow protruding from his throat. He lowered the body to the ground; then, shouting a curse, the young Cimmerian ripped his broad-bladed tulwar from its scabbard and turned with his comrades to meet the howling charge. For

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most of a month, he had ridden the dusty Hyrkanian plains as part of the escort. The monotony had long since begun to chafe him, and now his barbaric soul craved violent action to dispell his boredom.

His blade met the gilded scimitar of the foremost rider with such terrific force that the other's sword snapped near the hilt. Grinning like a tiger, Conan drew his sword in a back-handed slash across the bowlegged little warrior's belly. Howling like a doomed soul on the red-hot floors of Hell, his opponent fell twitching into a patch of blood-spattered snow.

Conan twisted in his saddle to catch another slashing sword on his shield. As he knocked the foeman's blade aside, he drove the point of his tulwar straight into the slant-eyed, yellowish face that snarled into his, watching the enemy's visage dissolve into a smear of ruined flesh.

Now the attackers were upon them in force. Dozens of small, dark men in fantastic, intricate armor of lacquered leather, trimmed with gold and flashing with gems, as-sailed them with demoniac frenzy. Bows twanged, lances thrust, and swords whirled and clashed.

Beyond the ring of his attackers, Conan saw his comrade Juma, a gigantic black from Kush, fighting on foot; his horse had fallen to an arrow at the first rush. The Kushite had lost his fur hat, so that the golden bangle in one ear winked in the fading light; but he had retained his lance. With this, he skewered three of the stocky attackers out of their saddles, one after another.

Beyond Juma, at the head of the column of King Yildiz's troop of picked warriors, the commander of the escort, Prince Ardashir, thundered commands from atop his mighty stallion. He wheeled his horse back and forth to keep between the foe and the horse-litter which bore his charge. This was Yildiz's daughter, Zosara. The troop were escorting the princess to her wedding with Kujula, the Great Khan of die Kuigar nomads.

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Even as Conan watched, he saw Prince Ardashir clutch at his fur-cloaked chest. As if conjured up by magic, a black arrow had sprouted suddenly from his gemmed gorget. The prince gaped at the shaft; then, stiff as a statue, he toppled from horseback, his jewel-crusted, spiked hel-met falling into the blood-spotted snow.

Thereafter, Conan became too busy to notice anything but the foes that swept howling around him. Although little more than a youth, the Cimmerian towered several inches above six feet. The swarthy attackers were dwarfed by comparison with his clean-limbed height. As they whirled around him in a snarling, yelping ring, they looked like a

pack of hounds attempting to pull down a kingly tiger.

The battle swirled up and down the slope, like dead leaves whirled by autumnal gusts. Horses stamped, reared, and screamed; men hacked, cursed, and yelled. Here and there a pair of dismounted men continued their battle on foot. Bodies of men and horses lay in the churned mud and the trampled snow.

Conan, a red haze of fury thickening before his eyes, swung his tulwar with berserk fury. He would have preferred one of the straight broadswords of the West, to which he was more accustomed. Nevertheless, in the first few moments of the battle, he wreaked scarlet havoc with the unfamiliar weapon. In his flying hand, the glittering steel blade wove a shimmering web of razor-edged death about him. Into that web no less than nine of the fallow little men in lacquered leather ventured, to fall disem-boweled or headless from their shaggy ponies. As he fought, the burly young Cimmerian bellowed a savage war chant of his primitive people; but soon he found that he needed every last bit of breath, for the battle grew rather than lessened in intensity.

Only seven months before, Conan had been the only warrior to survive the ill-fated punitive expedition that

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King Yildiz had launched against a rebellious satrap of northern Turan, Munthassem Khan. By means of black sorcery, the satrap had smashed the force sent against him. He had—so he thought—wiped out the hostile army from its high-born general, Bakra of Akif, down to the lowliest mercenary foot soldier. Young Conan alone had survived. He lived to penetrate the city of Yaralet, which was withering under the magic-maddened satrap's rule, and to bring a terrible doom on Munthassem Khan.

Returning in triumph to the glittering Turanian capital of Aghrapur, Conan received, as a reward, a place in this honor guard. At first he had had to endure the gibes of his fellow troopers at his clumsy horsemanship and indifferent skill with the bow. But the gibes soon died away as the other guardsmen learned to avoid provoking a swing of Conan's sledgehammer fists, and as his skill in riding and shooting improved with practice.

Now, Conan was beginning to wonder if this expedition could truly be called a reward. The light, leathern shield on his left arm was hacked into a shapeless ruin; he cast it aside. An arrow struck his horse's rump. With a scream, the beast brought its head down and bucked, lashing out with its heels. Conan went flying over its head; the horse bolted and disappeared.

Shaken and battered, the Cimmerian scrambled to his feet and fought on afoot. The scimitars of his foes slashed away his cloak and opened rents in his hauberk of chain mail. They slit the leathern jerkin beneath, until Conan bled from a dozen little superficial wounds.

But he fought on, teeth bared in a mirthless grin and eyes blazing a volcanic blue in a flushed, congested face framed by a square-cut black mane. One by one his fellows were cut down, until only he and the gigantic black, Juma, stood back to back. The Kushite howled wordlessly as he swung the butt of his broken lance like a club.

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Then it seemed as if a hammer came up out of the red mist of berserk fury that clouded Conan's brain, as a heavy mace crashed against the side of his head, denting and cracking the spiked helm and driving the metal against his temple. His knees buckled and gave. The last thing he heard was the sharp, despairing cry of the princess as squat, grinning warriors tore her from the veiled palanquin down to the red snow that splotched the slope. Then, as he fell face down, he knew nothing.

2. The Cup of the Gods

A thousand red devils were beating against Conan's skull with red-hot hammers, and his cranium rang like a smit-ten anvil with every motion. As he slowly clambered out of black insensibility, Conan found himself dangling over one mighty shoulder of his comrade Juma, who grinned to see him awaken and helped him to stand. Although his head hurt abominably, Conan found he was strong enough to stay on his feet. Wondering, he looked about him.

Only he, Juma, and the girl Zosara had survived. The rest of the party—including Zosara's maid, slain by an arrow—were food for the gaunt, gray wolves of the Hyrkanian steppe. They stood on the northern slopes of the Talakmas, several miles south of the site of the battle. Stocky brown warriors in lacquered leather, many with bandaged wounds, surrounded them. Conan found that his wrists were stoutly manacled, and that massive iron chains linked the manacles. The princess, in silken coat and trousers, was also fettered; but her chains and fetters were much lighter and seemed to be made of solid silver.

Juma was also chained, upon him most of the attention of their captors was focused. They crowded around the Kushite, feeling his skin and then glancing at their fingers to see if his color had come off. One even moistened a

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piece of cloth in a patch of snow and then rubbed it against the back of Juma's hand. Juma grinned broadly and chuckled.

"It must be they've never seen a man like me," he said to Conan.

The officer in command of the victors snapped a command. His men swung into their saddles. The princess was

bundled back into her horse litter. To Conan and Juma the commander said, in broken Hyrkanian: "You two! You walk."

And walk they did, with the spears of the Azweri, as their captors were called, nudging them with frequent pricks between their shoulders. The litter of the princess swayed between its two horses in the middle of the column. Conan noted that the commander of the Azweri troop treated Zosara with respect; she did not appear to have been physically harmed. This chieftain did not seem to bear any grudge against Conan and Juma for the havoc they had wrought among his men, the death and wounds they had dealt.

"You damn good fighters!" he said with a grin. On the other hand, he took no chances of letting his prisoners escape, or of letting them slow down the progress of his company by lagging. They were made to walk at a brisk pace from before dawn to after sunset, and any pause was countered by a prod with a lance. Conan set his jaw and obeyed for the moment.

For two days they wended over a devious trail through the heart of the mountain range. They crossed passes where they had to plow through deep snow, still unmelted from the previous winter. Here the breath came short from the altitude, and sudden storms whipped their ragged garments and drove stinging particles of snow and hail against their faces. Juma's teeth chattered. The black man

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found the cold much harder to endure than Conan, who had been reared in a northerly clime.

They came forth on the southern slopes of the Talakmas at last, to look upon a fantastic sight—a vast, green valley that sloped down and away before them. It was as if they stood on the lip of a stupendous dish. Below them, little clouds crept over leagues of dense, green jungle. In the midst of this jungle, a great lake or inland sea reflected the azure of the clear, bright sky.

Beyond this body of water, the green continued on until it was lost in a distant purple haze. And above the haze, jagged and white, standing out sharply against the blue, rose the peaks of the mighty Himelias, hundreds of miles further south. The Himelias formed the other lip of the dish, which was encircled by the vast crescent of the Talakmas to the north and the Himelias to the south.

Conan spoke to the officer: "What valley is this?"

"Meru," said the chief. "Men call it, Cup of Gods."

"Are we going down there?"

"Aye. You go to great city, Shamballah."

"Then what?"

"That for *rimpoche*—for god-king to decide."

"Who's he?"

"Jalung Thongpa, Terror of Men and Shadow of Heaven. You move along now, white-skinned dog. No time for talk."

Conan-growled deep in his throat as a spear prick urged him on, silently vowing some day to teach this god-king the meaning of terror. He wondered if this ruler's divinity were proof against a foot of steel in his guts.... But any such happy moment was still in the future.

Down they went, into the stupendous depression. The air grew warmer; the vegetation, denser. By the end of the day they were slogging through a land of steaming jungle warmth and swampy forest, which overhung the

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road in dense masses of somber dark green, relieved by the brilliant blossoms of flowering trees. Bright-hued birds sang and screeched. Monkeys chattered in the trees. In-sects buzzed and bit. Snakes and lizards slithered out of the path of the party.

It was Conan's first acquaintance with a tropical jungle, and he did not like it. The insects bothered him, and the sweat ran off him in streams. Juma, on the other hand, grinned as he stretched and filled his huge lungs.

"It is like my homeland," he said.

Conan was struck silent with awe at the fantastic land-scape of verdant jungle and steamy swamp. He could al-most believe that this vast valley of Meru was, in truth, the home of the gods, where they had dwelt since the dawn of time. Never had he seen such trees as those colossal cycads and redwoods, which towered into the misty heavens. He wondered how such a tropical jungle could be surrounded by mountains clad in eternal snows.

Once an enormous tiger stepped noiselessly into the path before them—a monster nine feet long, with fangs like daggers. Princess Zosara, watching from her litter, gave a little scream. There was a quick motion among the Azweri and a rattle of accouterments as they readied their weapons. The tiger, evidently thinking the party too strong for it, slipped into the jungle as silently as it had come.

Later, the earth shook to a heavy tread. With a loud snort, a huge beast burst from the rhododendron thickets and thundered across their path. As gray and rounded as a mountainous boulder, it somewhat resembled an enormous pig, with thick hide folded into bands. From its snout, a stout, blunt, recurved horn, a foot in length, arose. It halted, staring stupidly at the cavalcade from dim little pig's eyes; then, with another snort, it crashed off through the underbrush.

"Nose-horn," said Juma. "We have them in Kush."

The jungle gave way at length to the shores of the great

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blue lake or inland sea that Conan had seen from the heights. For a time, they followed the curve of this un-known body of water, which the Azweri called *Sumeru* Tso. At last, across a bay of this sea, they sighted the walls, domes, and spires of a city of rose-red stone, standing amid fields and paddies between the jungle and the sea.

"Shamballah!" cried the commander of the Azweri. As one man, their captors dismounted, knelt, and touched their foreheads to the damp earth, while Conan and Juma exchanged a mystified glance.

"Here gods dwell!" said the chief. "You walk fast, now. If you make us late, they skin you alive. Hurry!"

3. *The City of Skulls*

The gates of the city were fashioned of bronze, green with age and cast in the likeness of a gigantic, horned human skull. Square, barred windows above the portal made the skulls's eye sockets, while below them the barred grill of the portcullis grinned at them like the teeth in fleshless jaws. The leader of the little warriors winded his twisted bronze trumpet, and the portcullis rose. They entered the unknown city.

Here, everything was hewn and carved from rose-pink stone. The architecture was ornate, cluttered with sculpture and friezes swarming with demons and monsters and many-armed gods. Gigantic faces of red stone glared down from the sides of towers, which dwindled tier upon tier into tapering spires.

Every where he looked, Conan saw carvings in the form of human skulls. They were set into the lintels over door-ways. They hung on golden chains about the yellow-brown necks of the Meruvians, whose only other garment, both for men and for women, was a short skirt. They appeared on the bosses of the shields of the guards at the gate and were riveted to the fronts of their bronze helmets.

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Through the broad, well-planned avenues of this fantastic city the troop pursued its course. The half-naked Meruvians stepped out of their way, casting brief, in-curious glances at the two stalwart prisoners and at the horse litter containing the princess. Among the throngs of bare-breasted city-dwellers moved, like crimson shadows, the forms of shaven-headed priests, swathed from neck to ankle in voluminous robes of gauzy red stuff.

Amid groves of trees, covered with flowers of scarlet, azure, and gold, the palace of the god-king loomed up before them. It consisted of one gigantic cone or spire, tapering up from a squat, circular base. Made entirely of red stone, the round tower wall climbed upwards in a spiral, like that of some curious, conical sea-shell. On each stone of the spiral parapet was graven the likeness of a human skull. The palace gave the impression of a tremendous tower made of death's heads. Zosara could scarcely re-press a shudder at this sinister ornamentation, and even Conan set his jaw grimly.

They entered through another skull-gate and thence through massive stone walls and huge rooms into the throne-room of the god-king. The Azweri, dirty and travel-stained, remained in the rear, while a pair of gilded guardsmen, each armed with an ornate halberd, took the arms of each of the three prisoners and led them to the throne.

The throne, which rested atop a dais of black marble, was all of one huge piece of pale jade, carven into the likeness of ropes and chains of skulls, fantastically looped and interwoven. Upon this greenish-white chair of death sat the half-divine monarch, who had summoned the prisoners into this unknown world.

For all the seriousness of his plight, Conan could not repress a grin. For the *rimpoche* Jalung Thongpa was very short and fat, with scrawny bow legs that scarcely reached the floor. His huge belly was swathed in a sash of cloth-of-

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gold, which blazed with gems. His naked arms, swollen with flabby fat, were clasped by a dozen golden armlets, and jeweled rings flashed on his pudgy fingers. The bald head that lolled on top of his misshapen body was notably ugly, with dangling dewlaps, pendulous lips, and crooked, discolored teeth. The head was topped by a spired helmet or crown of solid gold, blazing with rubies. Its weight seemed to bow its wearer beneath it.

As Conan looked more closely at the god-king, he saw that Jalung Thongpa was peculiarly deformed. One side of his face did not match the other. It hung slackly from the bone and bore a blank, filmed eye, while the other eye was bright with the glint of malicious intelligence.

The rimpoche's good eye was now fixed upon Zosara, ignoring the two gigantic warriors who accompanied her. Beside the throne stood a tall, gaunt man in the scarlet robes of a Meruvian priest. Beneath his shaven pate, cold

green eyes looked out upon the scene with icy contempt. To him the god-king turned and spoke in a high, squeaky voice. From the few words of Meruvian that Conan had picked up from the Azweri, he pieced together enough to understand that the tall priest was the king's chief wizard, the Grand Shaman, Tanzong Tengri.

From scraps of the ensuing conversation, Conan further guessed that, by his magic, the shaman had seen the approach of the troop escorting the Princess Zosara to her Kuigar bridegroom and had shown this vision to the god-king. Filled with simple, human lust for the slim Turanian girl, Jalung Thongpa had dispatched the troop of his Azweri horsemen to seize her and fetch her to his seraglio.

That was all that Conan wanted to know. For seven days, ever since his capture, he had been pushed and prodded and bedeviled. He had walked his feet off, and his temper was at the breaking point.

The two guards that flanked him were racing the throne with respectfully downcast eyes, giving their full attention

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to the rimpoche, who might at any instant issue a command. Conan gently helped the chains that bound his wrists. They were too stout for him to break by main force; he had tried in the first days of this captivity and failed.

Quietly, he brought his wrists together, so that the length of chain hung down in a loop for a foot. Then, pivoting, he suddenly snapped his arms up past the head of the left-hand guard. The slack of the chain, swung like a whip, caught the guard across the face and sent him staggering back, blood gushing from a broken nose.

At Conan's first violent movement, the other guard had whirled and brought down the head of his halberd to the guard position. As he did so, Conan caught the head of the halberd in the slack of the chain and jerked the pole arm out of the guard's grasp.

A slash with the slack of the chain sent another guard reeling back, clutching the bloody ruin of his mouth and spitting a broken tooth. Conan's feet were chained too closely together to permit a full stride. But from the floor in front of the dais he leaped with both feet together, like a frog. In two such grotesque bounds, Conan was up on the dais, and his hands were locked about the fat neck of the slobbering little god-king, squatting on his pile of skulls. The rimpoche's good eye goggled in terror, and his face blackened from the pressure of Conan's thumbs on his windpipe.

The guards and nobles fluttered about, squealing with panic, or stood frozen with shock and terror at this strange giant who dared to lay violent hands upon their divinity.

"One move toward me, and I crush the life from this fat toad!" Conan growled.

Alone of the Meruvians in the room, the Grand Shaman had shown no sign of panic or surprise when the ragged youth had exploded in a whirlwind of fury. In perfect Hyrkanian, he asked:

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"What is your will, barbarian?"

"Set free the girl and the black! Give us horses, and we will quit your accursed valley forever. Refuse—or try to trick us—and I'll crush your little king to a pulp!"

The shaman nodded his skull-like head. His green eyes were as cold as ice in the masklike face of tight-stretched, saffron skin. With a commanding gesture, he raised his carved staff of ebony.

"Set free the princess Zosara and the black-skinned captive," he ordered calmly. Pale-faced servitors with frightened eyes scurried to do his bidding. Juma grunted, rubbing his wrists. Beside him, the princess shivered. Conan swung the limp form of the king in front of him and stepped from the dais.

"Conan!" bellowed Juma. "Beware!"

Conan whirled, but too late. As he had moved to the edge of the dais, the Grand Shaman acted. Nimble as a striking cobra, his ebony staff flicked out and lightly tapped Conan's shoulder, where his naked skin bulged through the rents in his ragged clothing. Conan's lunge toward his antagonist was never completed. Numbness spread through his body, like venom from a reptile's fang. His mind clouded; his head, too heavy to hold up, fell forward on his chest. Limply, he collapsed. The half-strangled little god-king tore free from his grasp.

The last sound Conan heard was the thunderous bellow of the black as he went down under the wriggling swarm of brown bodies.

4. *The Ship of Blood*

Above all, it was hot and it stank. The dead, vitiated air of the dungeon was stale. It reeked with the stench of close-packed, sweating bodies. A score of naked men were crammed into one filthy hole, surrounded on all sides by huge blocks of stone weighing many tons. Many were

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small, brown Menivians, who sprawled about, listless and apathetic. There were a handful of the squat, slant-eyed little warriors who guarded the sacred valley, the Azweri. There were a couple of hawk-nosed Hyrkanians. And there were Conan the Cimmerian and his giant black comrade, Juma. When the Grand Shaman's staff had struck him into insensibility and the warriors had pulled down the mighty Juma by weight of numbers, the infuriated rimpoche had

commanded that they pay the ultimate penalty for their crime.

In Shamballah, however, the ultimate penalty was not death, which in Meruvian belief merely released the soul for its next incarnation. Enslavement they considered worse, since it robbed a man of his humanity, his individuality. So to slavery they were summarily condemned.

Thinking of it, Conan growled deep in his throat, and his eyes blazed with smouldering fires out of his dark face, peering through the shaggy, matted tangle of his uncut black mane. Chained beside him, Juma, sensing Conan's frustration, chuckled. Conan glowered at his comrade; sometimes Juma's invincible good humor irritated him. For a free-born Cimmerian, slavery was indeed an intolerable punishment.

To the Kushite, however, slavery was nothing new. Slave raiders had torn Juma as a child from his mother's arms and dragged him out of the sweltering jungles of Kush to the slave marts of Shem. For a while he had worked as a field hand on a Shemite farm. Then, as his great thews began to swell, he had been sold as an apprentice gladiator to the arenas of Argos.

For his victory in the games held to celebrate the victory of King Milo of Argos over King Ferdrugo of Zbgara, Juma was given his freedom. For a time he lived in various Hyborian nations by thieving and by odd jobs. Then he drifted east to Turan, where his mighty stature and skill

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in combat won him a place in the ranks of King Yildiz's mercenaries.

There he had come to know the youthful Conan. He and the Cimmerian had struck it off from the first. They were the two tallest men among the mercenary troops, and both came from far, outlandish countries; they were the only members of their respective races among the Turanians. Their comradeship had now led them to the slave pits of Shamballah and would shortly lead them to the ultimate indignity of the slave block. There they would stand naked in the blinding sun, poked and prodded by prospective buyers while the slave dealer bellowed praises of their strength.

The days dragged slowly past, as crippled snakes drag their tails painfully through the dust. Conan, Juma, and the others slept and woke to receive wooden bowls of rice, stingily shared out by their overseers. They spent the long days fitfully dozing or languidly quarreling.

Conan was curious to learn more about these Meruvians, for in all his wanderings he had never encountered their like. They dwelt here in this strange valley as their ancestors had done since time began. They had no contact with the outside world and wanted none.

Conan became friendly with a Meruvian named Tashudang, from whom he learned something of their sing-song language. When he asked why they called their king a god, Tashudang replied that the king had lived for ten thousand years, his spirit being reborn in a different body after each sojourn in mortal flesh. Conan was skeptical of this, for he knew the sort of lies that kings of other lands spread about themselves. But he prudently kept his opinion to himself. When Tashudang complained mildly and resignedly of the oppression of the king and his shamans, Conan asked:

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"Why don't you and your fellows get together and throw the whole lot into the Sumeru Tso, and rule your-selves? That's what we would do in my country if anybody tried to tyrannize over us."

Tashudang looked shocked. "You know not what you say, foreigner! Many centuries ago, the priests tell us, this land was much higher than it now is. It stretched from the tops of the Himelias to the tops of the Talakmas—one great, lofty plain, covered with snow and whipped by icy winds. The Roof of the World, it was called.

"Then Yama, the king of the demons, determined to create this valley for us, his chosen people, to dwell in. By a mighty spell, he caused the land to sink. The ground shook with the sound of ten thousand thunders, molten rock poured from cracks in the earth, mountains crumbled, and forests went up in flame. When it was over, the land between the mountain chains was as you now see it. Because it was now a lowland, the climate wanned, and the plants and beasts of the warm countries came to dwell in it. Then Yama created the first Meruvians and placed them in the valley, to inhabit forever. And he appointed the shamans as leaders and enlighteners of the people.

"Sometimes the shamans forget their duties and oppress us, as if they were but greedy common men. But Yama's command, for us to obey the shamans, still holds good. If we defy it, Yama's great spell will be nullified, and this land will rise to the height of the mountain tops and again become a cold waste. So, no matter how they abuse us, we dare not revolt against the shamans."

"Well," said Conan, "if that filthy little toad is your idea of a god—"

"Oh, no!" said Tashudang, his eyeballs glistening white in the dimness with fear. "Say it not! He is the only-be-gotten son of the great god, Yama himself. And when he calls his father, the god comes!" Tashudang buried his face

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in his hands, and Conan could get no more words out of him that day.

The Meruvians were an odd race. Theirs was a peculiar lassitude of spirit—a somnolent fatalism that bade them bow to everything that came upon them as a predestined visitation from their cruel, enigmatic gods. Any resistance to fate on their part, they believed, would be punished, if not immediately, then in their next incarnation.

It was not easy to drag information out of them, but the Cimmerian youth kept doggedly at it. For one thing, it helped to pass the unending days. For another, he did not intend to remain in slavery long, and every bit of information that he could gather about this hidden kingdom and its peculiar people would be of value when he and Juma came to try for freedom. And finally, he knew how important it was in traveling through a strange country, to command at least a smattering of the local language. Although not at all a scholar by temperament, Conan picked up languages easily. He had already mastered several and could even read and write some of them a little.

At last came the fateful day when the overseers in black leather strode amongst the slaves, wielding heavy whips and herding their charges out the door. "Now," sneered one, "we shall see what prices the princes of the Sacred Land will pay for your unwieldy carcasses, outland swine!" And his whip raised a long weal across Conan's back.

Hot sun beat down on Conan's back like whips of fire. After being so long in darkness, he was dazzled by the brightness of day. After the slave auction, they led him up the gangplank to the deck of a great galley, which lay moored to the long, stone quays of Shamballah. He squinted against the sun and cursed in a growling under-tone. This, then, was the doom to which they had

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sentenced him—to drudge at the oars until death took him.

"Get down in the hold, you dogs!" spat the ship's overseer, cuffing Conan's jaw with the back of his hand. "Only the children of Yama may stride the deck!"

Without thinking, the Cimmerian youth exploded into action. He drove his balled fist into the burly overseer's bulging belly. As the breath hissed from the man's lungs, Conan followed the blow with a hammerlike right to the jaw, which stretched the shipman on the deck. Behind him, Juma howled with joy and struggled to get up the line to stand beside him.

The commander of the ship's guard rapped out an order. In a flash, the points of a dozen pikes, in the hands of wiry little Meruvian marines, were leveled at Conan. The Cimmerian stood in the circle of them, a menacing growl rising to his lips. But he belatedly controlled his rage, knowing that any move would bring instant death.

It took a bucket of water to revive the overseer. He laboriously climbed to his feet, blowing like a walrus, while water ran down his bruised face into his sparse black beard. His eyes glared into Conan's with insane rage, then cooled to icy venom.

The officer began to issue a command to the marines: "Slay the—" but the overseer interrupted:

"Nay, slay him not. Death were too easy for the dog. Ill make him whimper to be put out of his misery ere I've done with him."

"Well, Gorthangpo?" said the officer.

The overseer stared over the oar pit, meeting the cowed gaze of a hundred-odd naked brown men. They were starved and scrawny, and their bent backs were criss-crossed by a thousand whip scars. The ship carried a single bank of long oars on each side. Some oars were manned by two rowers, some by three, depending upon the size and

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strength of the slaves. The overseer pointed to an oar in the waist, to which three gray-haired, skeletal old men were chained.

"Chain him to yonder oar! Those walking corpses are played out; they are of no more use to us. Clear the oar of them. This foreign lad needs to stretch his arms a bit; well give him all the room he needs. And if he follow not the pace, I'll open his back to the spine!"

As Conan watched impassively, the sailors unlocked the manacles that connected the wrist chains of the three old men to rings on the oar itself. The old men screamed with terror as brawny arms heaved them over the rail. They hit the water with a great splash and sank without a trace, save for the bubbles that rose one by one to the surface and burst.

Conan was chained to the oar in their place. He was to do the work of all three. As they fastened him to the filth-slimed bench, the overseer eyed him grimly.

"We'll see how you like pulling an oar, boy. You'll pull and pull until you think your back is breaking—and then you'll pull some more. And every time you slack off or miss a boat, I'll remind you of your place, like this!"

His arm swung; the whip uncoiled against the sky and came whistling down across Conan's shoulders.

The pain was like that of a white-hot iron rod against his flesh. But Conan did not scream or move a muscle. It was as if he had felt nothing, so strong was the iron of his will.

The overseer grunted, and the lash cracked again. This time a muscle at one corner of Conan's grimly set mouth twitched, but his eyes looked stonily ahead. A third lash, and a fourth. Sweat formed on the Cimmerian's brow; it trickled down into his eyes, stinging and smarting, even as the red blood ran down his back. But he gave no sign of feeling pain.

Behind him, he heard Juma's whisper: "Courage!"

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Then came a call from the afterdeck; the captain wished to sail. Reluctantly, the overseer gave up his pleasure of lashing the Cimmerian's back to pulp.

The sailors cast off the ropes that moored the ship to the quay and shoved off with boathooks. Aft of the oar benches but on the same level, in the shade of the catwalk that ran the length of the ship over the heads of the row-ers, sat a naked Meruvian behind a huge drum. When the ship had cleared the quay, the coxswain lifted a wooden maul and began to thump the drum. With each beat, the slaves bent to the oars, rising to their feet, raising the looms, and leaning back until their weight brought them down on the benches; then pushing the looms down and forward and repeating. Conan soon caught the rhythm, as did Juma, chained to the oar behind him.

Conan had never before been on a ship. As he heaved at his oar, his quick eyes peered around him at the listless, dull-eyes slaves with whip-scarred backs, who worked on the slimy benches in the frightful stench of their own waste. The galley was low through the waist, where the slaves labored; the rail was only a few feet above the water. It was higher in the bow, where the seamen berthed, and in the carved and gilded stern, where the officers had their quarters. A single mast arose amidships. The yard of the single triangular sail, and the furled sail itself, lay along the catwalk over the oar pit.

When the ship had left the harbor, the sailors untied the lashings that held the sail and its yard to the catwalk and raised it, heaving on the halyard and grunting a chantey. The yard went up by jerks, a few inches at a time. As it rose, the gold-and-purple striped sail unfurled and shook out with snapping, booming sounds. Since the wind was fair on the quarter, the oarsmen were given a rest while the sail took over.

Conan noted that the entire galley had been made from some wood that either by nature or by staining was of a

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dark red color. As he gazed about, eyes half shut against the glare, the ship looked as if it had been dipped in blood. Then the whip sang above him and the overseer, on the catwalk above, yelled down:

"Now lay to, you lazy swine!"

A lash laid another welt across his shoulders. It is indeed a ship of Wood, he thought to himself; slaves' blood.

5. *Rogue's Moon*

For seven days, Conan and Juma sweated over the massive oars of the red galley as it plodded its way around the shores of the Sumeru Tso, stopping overnight at each of the seven sacred cities of Meru: Shondakor, Thogara, Auzakia, Issedon, Paliana, Throana, and then—having made the circuit of the sea—back to Shamballah. Strong men though they were, it was not long before the un-remitting labor brought them to the edge of exhaustion, when their aching muscles seemed incapable of further effort. Yet still the tireless drum and the hissing whip drove them on.

Once a day, sailors drew buckets of cold, brackish water up over the side and drenched the exhausted slaves. Once a day, when the sun stood at the zenith, they were given a heaping bowl of rice and a long dipperful of water. At night they slept on their oars. The animal-like round of unvarying drudgery sapped the will and drained the mind, leaving the rowers soulless automata.

It would have broken the strength of any man—save for such as Conan. The young Cimmerian did not yield to the crushing burden of fate as did the apathetic Moravians. The unending labor at the oars, the brutal treatment, the indignity of the slimy benches, instead of sapping his will, only fed the fires within him.

When the ship returned to Shamballah and dropped

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anchor in the wide harbor, Conan had reached the limits of his patience. It was dark and still; the new moon—a slim, silver scimitar—hung low in the western sky, casting a wan, illusive light. It would soon set. Such a night was called a "rogue's moon" in the nations of the West, for such poorly-lit night were wont to be chosen by highway-men, thieves,

and assassins to ply their trades. Bent over their oars, ostensibly asleep, Conan and Juma discussed escape with the Meruvian slaves.

On the galley, the feet of the slaves were not fettered. But each wore a pair of manacles joined by a chain, and this chain was strung through an iron ring loosely looped around the loom of the oar. Although this ring slid freely along the loom, its travel was stopped at the outer end by the oarlock and, at the inner, by a collar or ferrule of lead. This collar, securely fastened to the butt end of the oar by an iron spike, acted as a counterweight to the blade of the oar. Conan had tested the strength of his chain and of the manacles and the ring a hundred times; but even his terrific strength, hardened by seven days of rowing, could not strain any of them. Still, in a tense, growling whisper, he urged schemes of revolt upon his fellow slaves.

"If we could get Gorthangpo down on our level," he said, "we could tear him to pieces with our nails and teeth. And he carries the keys to all our bonds. While we were unlocking the manacles, the marines would kill some of us; but once we got loose, we should outnumber them five or six to one—"

"Do not speak of it!" hissed the nearest Meruvian. "Do not even think of it!"

"Aren't you interested?" asked Conan in astonishment.

"Nay! Even to talk of such violence turns my bones to water."

"Mine, too," said another. "The hardships we suffer have been inflicted upon us by the gods, as a just punishment for some misdeed in a former life. To struggle

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against it were not only useless but a wicked blasphemy as well. I pray you, barbarian, hush your unholy talk and submit with becoming humility to your fate."

Such an attitude went against Conan's grain, nor was Juma a man to bow without resistance to any threat of doom. But the Meruvians would not listen to their arguments. Even Tashudang, unusually loquacious and friendly for a Meruvian, begged Conan to do nothing that would enrage Gorthangpo, the overseer, or bring down upon them a worse punishment from the gods than that which their divinities had already inflicted upon them.

Conan's argument was cut short by the song of the whip. Aroused by the murmur, Gorthangpo had crept out on the catwalk in the darkness. From the few whispered words he overheard, he divined that mutiny was brewing. Now his whip hissed and cracked on Conan's shoulders.

Conan had had enough. In one surge of motion, he bounded to his feet, seized the lashing end of the whip, and tore it out of Gorthangpo's grip. The overseer yelled for the marines.

There was still no way for Conan to get the iron ring off the loom of his oar. In his desperation, an inspiration struck him. The construction of the oarlock limited the vertical motion of the loom to a height of less than five feet above the deck on which he stood. Now he pushed the butt end of the oar up as far as it would go, climbed to the bench, and crouching, placed his shoulders beneath the loom. Then, with a terrific heave of his long, powerful legs, he straightened up. The oar broke in its oarlock with a rending crash. Quickly, Conan slipped his ring off the broken end. Now he had a serviceable weapon: a club or quarterstaff nine feet long, with a ten-pound mass of lead on one end.

Conan's first terrific swing caught the goggling overseer on the side of the head. His skull shattered like a melon, spattering the benches with a bloody spray of pulped

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brains. Then Conan hauled himself to the catwalk to meet the charge of the marines. Below on the benches, the scrawny, brown Meruvians crouched, whimpering prayers to their devil-gods. Only Juma imitated Conan's act, breaking his oar at the oarlock and slipping his slave ring loose.

The marines were Meruvians themselves, lax and lazy and fatalistic. They had never had to fight a slave mutiny; they did not believe such a thing possible. Least of all had they expected to have to face a burly young giant armed with a nine-foot club. Still, they came on bravely enough, although the width of the catwalk allowed them to approach Conan only two abreast.

Conan waded in, swinging wildly. His first blow hurled the first marine off the catwalk and into the benches with a broken sword arm. The second dropped the next man with a shattered skull. A pike was thrust at his naked breast; Conan knocked the pike out of its welder's hand, and his next blow hurled two men at once off the catwalk; the one whom he had struck with crushed-in ribs, and his companion jostled off the walk by the impact of the first victim's body.

Then Juma climbed up beside him. The Kushite's naked torso gleamed like oiled ebony in the dim moonlight, and his oar mowed down the advancing Meruvians like a scythe. The marines, unprepared to face two such mon-sters, broke and ran for the safety of the poop deck, whence their officer, just aroused from slumber, was screeching confused commands.

Conan bent to the corpse of Gorthangpo and searched his pouch for the key ring. Swiftly he found the key to all the manacles on the ship and unlocked his own, then did the same for Juma.

A bow twanged, and an arrow whistled over Conan's head and struck the mast. The two freed slaves did not wait to pursue the battle further. Dropping off the catwalk,

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they pushed through the cowering rowers to the rail, vaulted over the side, and vanished into the dark waters of Shamballah's

harbor. A few arrows sped after them, but in the dim light of the setting crescent moon the archers could do little more than shoot at random.

6. Tunnels of Doom

Two naked men hauled their dripping bodies out of the sea and peered about them in the murk. They had swum for hours, it seemed, looking for a way to get into Sham-ballah unobserved. At last they had found the outlet to one of the storm sewers of the ancient stone city. Juma still trailed the length of broken oar with which he had fought the marines; Conan had abandoned his on the ship. Occasionally a faint gleam of light came into the sewer from a storm grating set into a gutter in the street overhead, but the light was so feeble—the thin moon having set—that the darkness below remained impenetrable. So, in almost total darkness, the twain waded through the slimy waters, seeking a way out of these tunnels.

Huge rats squeaked and fled as they went through the stone corridors beneath the streets. They could see the glimmer of eyes through the dark. One of the larger scavengers nipped Conan's ankle, but he caught and crushed the beast in his hands and flung its corpse at its more cautious fellows. These quickly engaged in a squealing, rustling battle over the feast, while Conan and Juma hurried on through the upward-winding tunnels.

It was Juma who found the secret passage. Sliding one hand along the dank wall, he accidentally released a catch and snorted with surprise when a portion of the stone gave way beneath his questing fingers. Although neither he nor Conan knew where the passage led, they took it, as it seemed to slope upward toward the city streets above.

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At last, after a long climb, they came to another door. They groped in utter darkness until Conan found a bolt, which he slid back. The door opened with a squeak of dry hinges to his push, and the two fugitives stepped through and froze.

They stood on an ornamental balcony crowded with statues of gods or demons in a huge, octagonal temple. The walls of the eight-sided chamber soared upward, past the balcony, to curve inward and meet to form an eight-sided dome. Conan remembered seeing such a dome towering among the lesser buildings of the city, but he had never inquired as to what lay within it.

Below, at one side of the octagonal floor, a colossal statue stood on a plinth of black marble, facing an altar in the exact center of the chamber. The statue dwarfed everything else in the chamber. Rising thirty feet high, its loins were on a level with the balcony on which Conan and Juma stood. It was a gigantic idol of a green stone that looked like jade, although never had men found true jade in so large a mass. It had six arms, and the eyes in its scowling face were immense rubies.

Facing the statue across the altar stood a throne of skulls, like that which Conan had already seen in the throne room of the palace on his arrival in Shamballah, but smaller. The toadlike little god-king of Mem was seated on this throne. As Conan's glance strayed from the idol's head to that of the ruler, he thought he saw a hideous suggestion of similarity between the two. He shuddered and his nape prickled at the hint of unguessable cosmic secrets that lay behind this resemblance.

The rimpoche was engaged in a ritual. Shamans in scarlet robes knelt in ranks around the throne and the altar, chanting ancient prayers and spells. Beyond them, against the walls of the chamber, several rows of Mem-vians sat cross-legged on the marble pavement. From the

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richness of their jewels and their ornate if scanty apparel, they appeared to be the officials and the nobility of the kingdom. Above their heads, set in wall brackets around the balcony, a hundred torches flickered and smoked. On the floor of the chamber, in a square about the central altar, stood four torches, each crowned by the rich, golden flame of a butter lamp. The four flames wavered and sputtered.

On the altar between the throne and the colossus lay the naked, white, slender body of a young girl, held to the altar by slender golden chains. It was Zosara.

A low growl rumbled in Conan's throat. His smouldering eyes burned with blue fire as he watched the hated figures of King Jalang Thonpa and his Grand Shaman, the wizard-priest Tanzong Tengri.

"Shall we take them, Conan?" whispered Juma, his teeth showing white in the flickering dimness. The Cimmerian grunted.

It was the festival of the new moon, and the god-king was wedding the daughter of the king of Turan on the altar, before the many-armed statue of the Great Dog of Death and Terror, Yama the Demon King. The ceremony was proceeding according to the ancient rites prescribed in the holy texts of the Book of the Death God. Placidly anticipating the public consummation of his nuptials with the slim, long-legged Turanian girl, the divine monarch of Mem lolled on his throne of skulls as ranks of scarlet-clad shamans droned the ancient prayers.

Then came an interruption. Two naked giants dropped from nowhere to the floor of the temple—one a heroic figure of living bronze, the other a long-limbed menace whose mighty physique seemed to have been carved from ebony. The shamans froze in mid-chant as these two howl-ing devils burst into their midst.

Conan seized one of the torches and hurled it into the

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midst of the scarlet-robed shamans. They broke, scream-ing with pain and panic, as the flaming liquid butter set fire to their gauzy robes and turned them into living torches. The other three lamps followed in rapid succes-sion, spreading fire and confusion over the floor of the chamber.

Juma sprang toward the dais, where the king sat with his good eye staring in fear and astonishment. The gaunt Grand Shaman met Juma on the marble steps with his magical staff lifted to smite. But the black giant still had his broken oar, and he swung it with terrific force. The ebony staff flew into a hundred fragments. A second swing caught the wizard-priest in the body and hurled him, broken and dying, into the chaos of running, screaming, flaming shamans.

King Jalung Thongpa came next. Grinning, Juma charged up the steps toward the cowering little god-king. But Jalung Thongpa was no longer on his throne. Instead, he knelt in front of the statue, arms raised and chanting a prayer.

Conan reached the altar at the same time and bent over the nude, writhing form of the terrified girl. The light golden chains were strong enough to hold her, but not strong enough to withstand Conan's strength. With a grunt, he braced his feet and heaved on one; a link of the soft metal stretched, opened, and snapped. The other three chains followed, and Conan scooped up the sobbing princess in his arms. He turned—but then a shadow fell over him.

Startled, he looked up and remembered what Tashudang had told him: "When he calls his father, the god comes!"

Now he realized the full extent of the horror behind those words. For, looming above him in the flickering torchlight, the arms of the gigantic idol of green stone were moving. The scarlet rubies that served it for eyes were glaring down at him, bright with intelligence.

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7. When the Green God Wakes

The hairs lifted on Conan's nape, and he felt as if the blood in his veins had congealed to ice. Whimpering, Zosara pressed her face into the hollow of his shoulder and clung to his neck. On the black dais that upheld the throne of skulls, Juma also froze, the whites of his eyes showing as the superstitious terrors of his jungle heritage rose within him. The statue was coming to life.

As they watched, powerless to move, the image of green stone shifted one of its huge feet slowly, creakingly. Thirty feet above their heads, its great face leered down at them. The six arms moved jerkily, flexing like the limbs of some gigantic spider. The thing tilted, shifting its monstrous weight. One vast foot came down on the altar on which Zosara had lain. The stone block cracked and crumbled beneath the tons of living green stone.

"Crom!" breathed Conan. "Even stone lives and walks in this mad place! Come, girl—" He picked Zosara up and leaped down from the dais to the floor of the temple. From behind him came an ominous scraping sound of stone on stone. The statue was moving.

"Juma!" yelled Conan, casting a wild eye about for the Kushite. The black still crouched motionless beside the throne. Upon the throne, the little god-king pointed an arm, thick with fat and bright with jewels, at Conan and the girl.

"Kill—Yama! Kill-kill—kill!" he screamed.

The many-armed thing paused and peered about with its ruby eyes until it sighted Conan. The Cimmerian was nearly mad with the primitive night-fears of his barbarian people. But, as with many barbarians, his very fear drove him into combat with that which he dreaded. He put down the girl and heaved up a marble bench. Sinews creaking with the effort, he strode forward towards the lumbering colossus.

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Juma yelled: "No, Conan! Get away! It sees you!"

Now Conan stood near the monstrous foot of the walk-ing idol. The stone legs towered above him like the pillars of some colossal temple. His face congested with the effort, Conan raised the heavy bench over his head and hurled it at the leg. It crashed into the carven ankle of the colossus with terrific impact. The marble of the bench clouded with a web of cracks, which shot through it from end to end. He stepped even closer, picked up the bench again, and again

swung it against the ankle. This time the bench shattered into a score of pieces; but the leg, though slightly chipped, was not materially damaged. Conan reeled back as the statue took another ponderous step toward him.

"Conan! Look out!"

Jurna's yell made him look up. The green giant was stooping. The ruby eyes glared into his. Strange, to stare into the living eyes of a god! They were bottomlessly deep—shadow-veiled depths wherein his gaze sank end-lessly through red eons of time without thought. And deep within those crystalline depths, a cold, inhuman malignancy coiled. The god's gaze locked on his own, and the young Cimmerian felt an icy numbness spread through him. He could neither move nor think. . . .

Juma, howling with primal rage and fear, whirled. He saw the many mighty hands of stone swoop toward his comrade, who stood staring like one entranced. Another stride would bring Yama upon the paralyzed Cimmerian.

The black was too far from the tableau to interfere, but his frustrated rage demanded an outlet. Without conscious thought, he picked up the god-king, who shrieked and wriggled in vain, and hurled him toward his infernal parent

Jalung Thongpa whirled through the air and thudded down on the tessellated pave before the tramping feet of

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the idol. Dazed by his fall, the little monarch stared wildly about with his good eye. Then he screamed hideously as one titanic foot descended upon him.

The crunch of snapping bones resounded in the ringing silence. The god's foot slid on the marble, leaving a broad, crimson smear on the tiles. Creaking at the waist, the titanic figure bent and reached for Conan, then stopped.

The groping, green stone hands, fingers outspread, halted in mid-air. The burning crimson light faded from the ruby eyes. The vast body with its many arms and devil's head, which a moment before had been flexible and informed with life, froze into motionless stone once more.

Perhaps the death of the king, who had summoned this infernal spirit from the nighted depths of nameless dimensions, cancelled the spell that bound Yama to the idol. Or perhaps the king's death released the devil-god's will from the domination of his earthly kinsman. Whatever the cause, the instant the Jalung Thongpa was crushed into bubbling gore, the statue reverted to lifeless, immobile stone.

The spell that had gripped Conan's mind also broke. Numbly, the youth shook his head to clear it. He stared about him. The first thing of which he was aware was the princess Zosara, who flung herself into his arms, weeping hysterically. As his bronzed arms closed about her softness and he felt the feathery touch of her black, silken hair against his throat, a new kind of fire flared up in his eyes, and he laughed deeply.

Juma came running across the floor of the temple. "Conan! Everybody either is dead or has ran away! There should be horses in the paddock behind the temple. Now is our chance to quit this accursed place!"

"Aye! By Crom, I shall be glad to shake the dust of

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this damned land from my heels," growled the Cimmerian, tearing the robe from the body of the Grand Shaman and draping it over the princess's nakedness. He snatched her up and carried her out, feeling the warmth and softness of her supple young body against his own.

An hour later, well beyond the reach of pursuit, they reined in their horses and examined the branching roads. Conan looked up at the stars, pondered, and pointed. "This way!"

Juma wrinkled his brow. "North?"

"Aye, to Hyrkania." Conan laughed. "Have you forgotten that we still have this girl to deliver to her bride-groom?"

Juma's brow wrinkled with greater puzzlement than before, seeing how Zosara's slim, white arms were wound around his comrade's neck and how her small head was nestled contentedly against his mighty shoulder. To her bridegroom? He shook his head; never would he understand the ways of Cimmerians. But he followed Conan's lead and turned his steed toward the mighty Talakma Mountains, which rose like a wall to sunder the weird land of Mem from the windy steppes of Hyrkania.

A month later, they rode into the camp of Kujula, the Great Khan of the Kuigar nomads. Their appearance was entirely different from what it had been when they fled from Shamballah. In the villages on the southern slopes of the Talakmas, they had traded the links from the golden chains that still dangled from Zosara's wrists and ankles for clothing suitable to snowy mountain passes and gusty plains. They wore fur caps, sheepskin coats, baggy trousers of coarse wool, and stout boots.

When they presented Zosara to her black-bearded bride-groom, the khan feasted and praised and rewarded them. After a carousal that lasted for several days, he sent them back to Turan loaded with gifts of gold.

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When they were well away from Khan Kujula's camp, Juma said to his friend: "That was a fine girl. I wonder you didn't keep her for yourself. She liked you, too."

Conan grinned. "Aye, she did. But I'm not ready to settle down yet. And Zosara will be happier with Kujula's jewels and soft cushions than she would be with me, galloping about the steppes and being roasted, frozen, and chased by wolves or hostile warriors." He chuckled. "Be-sides, though the Great Khan doesn't know it, his heir is already on the way."

"How do you know?"

"She told me, just before we parted."

Juma made clicking sounds from his native tongue. "Well, I will never, never underestimate a Cimmerian again!"

