

# CONAN AND THE MISTS OF DOOM

by  
**Roland Green**

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## DUST TO DUST!

The Lady stood in glory and grace and rested both hands lightly on the captive's forehead. He shivered, as if responding to this last human touch—and then between one breath and the next, he was no more. For the space of another breath, a column of silver dust in the shape of a man stood before the Lady.

Then she flung her hands downward, fingers pointing at the cup. The dust leaped, losing human semblance. It rose to the ceiling, then poured down into the cup. The crimson fire within flickered briefly, seemed about to change color, then steadied at a gesture and two soft words from the Lady of the Mists.

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**CONAN  
AND THE  
MISTS OF DOOM**

**ROLAND GREEN**

**TOR**

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

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## Prologue

The valley slashed into the flank of the Kezankian Mountains like a sword cut. The entrance deceived the casual eye, being but a narrow cleft in a spur of Mount Goadel. The mist often swirling about the heights aided the deception, giving the cleft the air of a place uncanny and unwholesome, where things a sane man would shun might lurk in wait.

Often the wind rose, driving away the mist, but raising a howling as of demons and lost souls as it whipped around the rocks. The wind-cry likewise kept travelers from being too curious about the valley.

It had been many years since travelers had allowed themselves to be curious about the valley, or anything else in this part of the Kezankian range. It was far from any place that concerned civilized folk, and too plainly a good home for bandits, outlaws, and still more debased forms of humanity. There were even tales of tribes of ape-men, kin to those of the Himelian peaks in Vendhya, dwelling above the snow line.

The man who led the column of soldiers up the slope toward the cleft knew more than most of the truth about the valley. It had indeed been home to bandits and outlaws. Some of these now followed him, won to obedience—if not loyalty—by gold in one hand and a whip in the other. Others, he and his company had slain with their own hands. Still others had fled, to become bleaching bones when the vultures were done with them.

About ape-men, Captain Muhbaras knew little and cared less. If they did not trouble him, he would leave them in whatever peace their lofty homes might afford them. He personally doubted that any creature dwelling among eternal snow and ice could have the wits of a louse, but then he had grown to manhood among the gurgling wells and trees sagging with ripe fruit of a Khorajan nobleman's estate.

Long-legged and unburdened save for a shirt of fine Vendhyan mail and an open-faced helm of Nemedian style, Muhbaras had reached the cleft well ahead of his column. Now he turned back to watch it mount the slope, and to count heads for straggling or desertion. Small fear of the latter, when all went in fear of the Lady of the Mists, who could see to the edge of the world, but there were always fools in any company.

One could hardly tell bandits from Khorajans or nomads; all wore the

same robes and headdress, sand-hued or dirty white, with boots and belts of camel's hide and a curved sword and dagger thrust into the belts. Some among each folk carried bows and quivers, but a keen-eyed man would have quickly seen that the bows were unstrung and the quivers bound tightly shut with leather thongs.

No man approached the entrance to the Valley of the Mists with ready arrows or strung bow. Not without the Lady's consent, and thus far that consent had not been forthcoming.

What had been forthcoming were harsh punishments for those who flouted the Lady's will. Punishments so dire, indeed, that those who had suffered them might have gladly changed places with the captives in the middle of the column. Their death would have been no less unclean, under the Lady's magic, but it would have been swifter and far less painful.

There were ten of the captives, bound into a single file by stout thongs about their waists. Their hands and feet were free, which meant vigilance by their guards, as the Lady disliked pursuing escapers with her spells, lest this endanger her secrets. There was hardly any choice, however, as no man with hands bound could mount the slopes here. Nor could a band of this size carry many helpless burdens over the rocks and along the ravines.

Escapes were few enough in truth, thanks to the potion the Lady's apothecary doled out to each band of raiders. If one could get enough of it down a captive's gullet, the man, woman, or child would be as docile as a sheep for up to three days. Muhbaras had scented some familiar herbs in the potion, and others he could not name; he suspected that the real secret of the potion was not knowable by common men.

The captives were seven men, if you counted one youth barely old enough to show a beard, and three women. Two with grave wounds and one who had fought to the last against swallowing the potion were vultures' fodder, as well as a warning to anyone who would pursue the raiders.

Muhbaras counted the captives twice, although there was no escape this far into the mountains for anyone who could neither fly like a bird nor sink into solid rock like a spirit. He made a gesture of aversion at that last thought; some of the tribes hereabouts commanded potent magic. It would not be well done to capture one of their shamans or the man's kin.

Then he turned toward the cleft in the rock, drew his sword (Nemedian work like his helm), and raised it hilt-first. He saw no one and heard nothing save the whisper of the wind on distant slopes, but he knew that keen eyes watched for still keener minds.

Crimson light darted from the cleft, striking a jewel in the sword's hilt. The jewel glowed like an oil lamp, but no oil lamp ever gave out such hues, not only a half-score different shades of crimson but hints of azure, emerald, amber—

"We have returned," the captain said. "We have ten. In the service of the Lady, we ask blessing."

The light darted out again. This time the crimson glow danced along the ground until it drew a complete circle around the column. Muhbaras tried not to think how much it resembled a noose, ready to be drawn tight. He told himself that he and his men had survived this rite a score of times without so much as a singed hair.

Reason and memory were of small use against the dark fear of old magic, coiling through a man's guts and gnawing at his will like a rat at a corpse. The captain felt a cold sweat creep across his skin under the mail and padding.

"In the service of the Lady, the blessing is given," the voice said. The captain tried for the tenth time to find something in the voice by which he might recognize the speaker. It would be of little value if he did, save for proving that not all the Lady's secrets were impenetrable.

The men behind him were looking at him, and he remembered that the next part of the rite was his.

"In the service of the Lady, we beg entrance to the Valley of the Mists."

The captain wondered, not quite idly, what might happen if he used some word less abject than "beg." So far he had lacked the courage to find out—as much for the sake of those who had followed him from Khoraja as for his own sake. He wondered if those who survived would receive their promised gold and estates, but doubting the word of Khoraja's rulers did not make him ready to throw away the lives of his men. He had held his duty as a captain near to his heart, long before he heard of the Lady of the Mists or laid eyes on the Kezankian Mountains.

"In the service of the Lady, entrance to the Valley of the Mists is granted."

He heard light footsteps, quickly lost in the grind and growl of stones shifting, which always sounded to him like the bowels of the mountains themselves rumbling. The stone-noise ended, the light of torches glowed from the cleft, and two figures stepped swiftly into view.

One was tall and dark, the other shorter and fair, and both were women. They wore silvered helmets, displaying on either side a golden

ornament in the form of a scorpion's tail, brown leather corselets reinforced with iron plates, loose breeches in the Turanian style, of heavy silk in a green so dark it was almost black, and boots whose style the captain did not recognize.

Each had a sword and dagger, and each carried a Turanian recurved bow and quiver of well-made arrows. Their faces under the helmets and bodies under the armor were good to look at. The sure grace of their movements and the stillness in their eyes made it clear no man but a fool would hope for more, and fools would meet weapons the women knew well how to use.

Northern folk had tales of shield-maidens, daughters of the gods, who roamed the earth seeking the souls of dead warriors, or so the captain had heard. He had thought them barbarians' fancies once; now he was not so sure. All of the Lady's Maidens had the same look, of being able to see into a man's soul and judge him.

It was that look, as much as their weapons and armor, that had kept the Maidens untouched. That, and knowing that what the Lady had done to disobedient archers would be as a child's tantrum to what she would do in defense of her Maidens.

"Any children?" the dark Maiden said.

"None."

"As well. Strong spirits are needed to feed the Mist."

"The strongest spirit, we freed back near the village. We could not force the potion down him without risking hurt to our people, and pursuit seemed closer than usual."

Why was he explaining himself to this madwoman, servant of a greater madwoman? Perhaps because he had seen her on guard more often than any other, and she looked less grim than most. The fair one, now—a man's hand would freeze on touching her, long before his manhood was anywhere near her.

"This is not well."

"It did not seem my decision, to sacrifice the Lady's servants."

"That is wisdom."

They continued to speak as the raiders filed past. Some of the prisoners had enough awareness to open their eyes and look about them, but the point of a sword in the back was enough to discourage laggards. At last the tail of the column vanished among the rocks, and Muhbaras was alone

on the mountainside with the Maidens.

"You are well, I trust?" the fair one said. Not for the first time, she made a question about the captain's health sound like a death sentence.

"I am well, and fit to come within," he replied, returning to ritual phrases.

*Which I would not do if I did not think your mistress needed my men more than they need her!*

## One

The desert lay north of Zamboula, south of Khauran, west of the mighty realm of Turan, now burgeoning in its strength under the lash of its bold new King Yezdigerd. It belonged to none of these.

Indeed, the land belonged to no one. Even names on it were few, and those mostly oases. The nomads were divided among a score of tribes, seldom at peace with one another; each tribe had its own names for the wadis, the depressions, the dunes.

The harsh sky and its blazing sun might have leached all the color from the land. The sand lay pale ochre and umber, the rocks seemed baked white as bones, and even the sparse vegetation was pallid and dusty.

Well off to the north, dust trails crept above the horizon. Still farther, barely visible, rose patches of deeper green. Together they told of caravan routes and cultivated lands. Only in the crystalline air of the desert would they have been visible at all, for they were a good day's ride on a stout horse.

Nearer at hand, a man standing on a well-placed dune might have seen another dust cloud rising to the sky. Before long, he would have seen the dark shapes of more than a dozen riders at the base of the cloud, growing even as he watched.

Remaining beyond bowshot, he would have taken them for a band of nomad warriors. Their garb was certainly that of the nomads, or of any man who braves a forge-hot desert journey—loose, flowing robes from crown to toe. All were well armed, mostly with long, curved swords or bows.

Closer up, a man who knew the tribes of the East might have doubted that these men were native to the desert. One saw silver on the hilts of some weapons, tattoos on bronzed cheeks, and subtle differences in the



tooled leather of the saddles and bridles. Yet most of the men and their mounts could have ridden into a nomad camp without drawing a second glance.

All except one, the leader. Few deserts ever spawned a man so gigantic, who needed a horse larger than any nomad ever bestrode to carry him even at a trot. Nor did those ice-blue eyes first open under any desert sun, and the blade that rode at the man's hip was as straight as his broad back.

Conan of Cimmeria was riding for Koth, with fourteen loyal Afghulis sworn to see him safely to that destination. Perhaps also they had hopes of plucking loot from the war in Koth.

The man on the dune might have stood watching until not only Conan but the rearmost of the riders was out of sight. Had he done so, however, he would shortly have seen a new dust cloud sprout on the horizon, moving swiftly on the trail of Conan's band. The Cimmerian and his Afghulis were not alone in the desert.

In the forefront of the band, Conan was not the first to see the riders behind. That modest honor went to a rider named Farad, of the Batari tribe. He spurred his mount up beside the Cimmerian's and shouted into the northerner's ear.

"We are followed. Many more than we are, from the dust they make."

Conan turned to look eastward. Farad's eyes were keen and his judgment sound. The riders behind had to be at least fifty, though probably not more than a hundred—which hardly mattered, as even fifty was four times the strength of Conan's band.

Nor did it matter much who they were, unless by some improbable chance they were a caravan gone astray or Zamboulans. Neither was likely to be found in this stretch of desert; more likely by far were nomads or Turanians, and neither would meet Conan and his men as friends.

In some nomad dialects the word "stranger" was also the word for "enemy." Among every nomad tribe, anyone who had wealth to take and no kin to avenge their death was fair game. The horses and weapons of Conan's band would be enough to sign their death warrant with any nomads numerous enough to take them, to say nothing of what Conan bore in a small pouch next to his skin.

That small sack of jewels was all his profit from two years among the Afghulis. That and a whole skin, which he supposed was more than many kept who went among the Afghulis in their native mountains.

Binding the scattered, brawling tribes of the Afghulis into a single host had at first seemed like a good idea. Conan knew his own skill and the prowess of the Afghuli warriors, likewise the weaknesses of every neighboring realm. A united Afghuli people could take their pick.

The Afghulis did not seem to care overmuch for this bright vision. If it meant fighting beside a man whose great-grandfather had insulted theirs, they would rather fight the man (or perhaps the towering foreigner who suggested that they forgive the insult).

It was Conan's luck, not to mention ready blade and stout thews, that kept his hide intact. With little but what he had on his person and no friends but those who owed him blood-debts, he had fled the mountains. Fighting their way through bandits and bears alike, they came to hear rumors of war in Koth.

Westward they rode, the Afghulis as eager as Conan to try their hand at winning loot and glory from the troubles of Koth. They had to ride well clear of the borders of Turan, however, for in that realm there was a price on Conan's head. Under King Yildiz's mild reign, few Turanians would have cared to gamble their lives on taking Conan's. Yezdigerd was not his father, and knew how to use both fear and greed to make men bold, even foolhardy.

Conan looked eastward again. He thought he saw a second dust cloud on the horizon, but after a moment knew it was only a dust devil, a creature of the wind. But the first cloud had grown larger, and now he thought he saw the glint of sunlight on steel.

The nomads wore no armor. In this land, armored riders were most likely Turanians. Conan looked westward, studying the ground with a practiced eye. He had fought in every kind of land from glacier to jungle, and knew what each offered to a hunted band.

To the west, the desert rolled away under the sun, offering little but sand and scrub. Anywhere in that emptiness, Conan's band would stand out like a pea on a platter. Once in bowshot, the enemy would have easy prey, unless night came—and it was only early afternoon.

To the north, however, a sprawling gray mass thrust its rocky head above the sand. Any who reached this ridge might lurk in its cracks and crevices until nightfall dimmed the enemy's sight, then slip away. At worst, it offered shelter for archery and ambushes, likewise high ground for a last stand if the odds against escape grew too long.

Conan grinned at the prospect of giving King Yezdigerd a few more widows' pensions to pay. This was the kind of fight that made his blood

sing and that had made his name in all Hyborian lands and more than a few others. Long odds, a need for both cunning and strength, and stout brothers-in-arms to tell the tales afterward or keep him company in death if that was his fate.

No one worthy of the name of warrior could complain about the battle Conan faced.

His only remaining problem was to be sure that the battle would be on his chosen ground, not that of the

Turanians. A good deal of open desert lay between Conan's men and the ridge, bare of cover but likely full of holes and cracks that could catch a horse's leg and doom its rider.

Conan had read a few books on the art of war, and thought most of them tried to make into wizardry something that was for the most part common sense. In none of them had he found one maxim he knew to be true: *The horse that has never stumbled before will stumble when you are riding for your life.*

He waved toward the ridge, while turning in the saddle to shout at the Afghulis. "We'll perch there until nightfall. Archers, to the rear, but I'll gut the man who wastes arrows." The Afghulis were mostly not the finished horse-archers of Turan, among the best in the world; but their pursuers would make a large target.

The archers reined in a trifle, the rest dug in spurs, and dust swirled around Conan's band as it re-formed for its last ride. Dust also swirled, higher and thicker than before, to their rear. Conan cast a final look behind him, thought he recognized Turanian banners, then put his head down and his heels in to ride for his life.

In a bare rock chamber in the wall of the Valley of the Mists, a woman sat cross-legged and alone on a bearskin thrown across a Turanian rug. Before her stood a tall wine cup of gilded bronze, with four handles and a broad base displaying archaic, even ancient runes known only among sorcerers and talked of in whispers even among them.

The Lady was as bare as the chamber, save for a necklace, bracelets, and coronet of fresh mountain creeper. A Maiden had plucked it in the night and brought it to the chamber before dawn, where it had remained in cool shadows. It was still so fresh that the last drops of dew trickled from the crinkled gray-green leaves down between the Lady's breasts.

The Lady of the Mists—she did not choose to remember any other

name—reached under the bearskin and drew out a heavy disk of age-blackened bronze. One could barely make out under the patina of centuries the sigil of Kull of Atlantis.

The Lady knew not whether some potent Atlantean spell still lurked in the bronze. She only knew that nothing else that had come into her hands so readily let her work her own.

That was as well. Workers in magic did best and lived longest (if they cared for that, as the Lady did) if they worked most with the magic they knew and commanded—as well as any mortal could command power from the realms of night.

She shifted her position with the languid grace of a cat half-roused from sleep, until she could reach the cup. She set the bronze disk atop the cup, so that it rested a hairsbreadth below the rim, completely covering the cup.

The movement sent more dew trickling between her breasts. No living man would have gazed on those breasts unstirred, nor did the rest of the Lady's form repel the eye any more than her breasts. She could have filled her bed more readily than most women, had she sought that—or had her eyes been other than they were.

They were of human size and shape, but of a golden hue seen in no race of men. She also had the vertical pupils of a cat, and these were a nightmare black against the yellow.

Any man seeing the Lady's form would have judged her human, and judged truly. Then, coming closer, a glimpse of her eyes would have changed his mind and likely sent him fleeing, faster than anything but the Lady's laughter could pursue. Or, if she took offense, the Lady's magic.

The Lady pressed a finger to the cup, moving it to see if its bronze seal was well in place. No rattle greeted her. She smiled, and her eyes narrowed, like those of a cat looking, as they so often do, into a world beyond human knowledge.

Then she rested both hands lightly on the bronze and began to sing. The cup quivered at first, then steadied, but around cup and Lady alike a crimson light began to spread.

Conan was now as careful not to look to his rear as any Aquilonian knight leading a charge. He did not do it for the knight's reasons of not wishing to show doubt that those sworn to him would follow steadfastly in his wake.

The Cimmerian kept his eyes to the front or the side because there lay the ridge that offered the only hope of safety, as well as any number of hidden dangers. The holes of burrowing rodents to snap a horse's leg like a rotten twig, soft sand to bring horse and man down together, nests of asps to give a lingering death if disturbed—these could end the race as thoroughly as being overtaken by the Turanians.

So could nomads or Turanians lying in ambush.

The nomads held no love for the Turanians, and even less now in the face of Yezdigerd's growing strength. That would not stay their hands for a moment if they thought they could buy a Turanian captain's goodwill with the heads of the Cimmerian and his following.

This was no land for any man who cared to live without eyes in the back of his head and his hand close to the hilt of his sword. Conan had lived no other way for more years than he had fingers, and in their feud-ridden land the Afghulis sucked in wariness with their mothers' milk.

"Conan!" The call rose above the thunder of hooves. "The Turanians send a band ahead, faster than the rest!"

Conan recognized the voice. It was Farad, first man among the Afghulis. He shouted back, without turning his head.

"They think to wolf-pack us. Time for the archers to make them think again."

"Or stop thinking at all!" Farad shouted back, battle-joy in his cry.

"Wolf-packing" was a pursuer's sending one band after another to force the pursued to a pace their mounts could not sustain. In time the pursued would have stumbling, foaming, dying mounts, at the mercy of the last fresh riders of the pursuer.

It suggested that the Turanians were regularly sworn horsemen of the host, or at worst the better sort of irregular, such as Conan himself had led during his service in Turan. Neither was often found this far into the desert—or rather, had not been found here before Yezdigerd took the throne of Turan, with ambitions to take everything else he could lay his hands on.

The ground began to rise before Conan's eyes. He studied it. Was there a ravine off to the right that led to the base of the ridge and offered shelter from arrows? The Cimmerian slowed to a trot, patting the neck of his foam-flecked horse reassuringly.

"Not much farther, lady," he muttered to the horse. Not much farther to at least brief safety or a swift death. They would find nothing else under

this desert sun.

The ravine was narrow and its floor studded with rocks thrusting up wildly, as if flung down by a mad giant. No passage there, at least no swift one—and while the Afghulis were threading their way through the rocks, the Turanians could seize one side of the ravine and send down a hail of arrows.

Conan's men would reach the rocks in the open or not at all.

The Cimmerian's spurs went in again. The mare whickered in protest, blew foam from her mouth, and gathered her legs under her.

"Come on, you sons of dogs!" Conan roared. "Or are you going to lie down for Turanians, of all the pox-ridden folk on earth!"

On staggering horses, some leaving trails of blood, the Afghulis followed. Conan risked a look behind and saw that the first band of the wolf pack had fallen back. Fallen back, moreover, onto ground already well adorned with fallen men and horses. Some still struggled, as the rest of the Turanians rode on past or sometimes over them.

The ridge loomed ahead. Conan drove spurs deeper. The mare responded with what had to be the last of her strength. Gravel and sand flew up about her hooves, like foam from the ram of a war galley.

Another look back. The center of the Turanians was advancing in a solid mass, but on either flank bands were breaking off.

So they were going to surround the ridge, were they? No one but a fool would fail to do that, and fools did not command Turanian horsemen all that often. More than one captain and more than one book on war had told Conan what his own sense said: *Never trust your enemy to be a witling.*

The thud of the mare's hooves on the ground changed pitch. The ground was harder now, with rock just under the sand and gravel. The other riders reached the hard ground, and half a hundred hooves drummed their way toward the rough ground.

Behind, the Turanian horns gave tongue again, and this time a drum joined them. Conan spat from a desert-dry and dust-filled mouth. The drum was no good news; often as not, the Turanians used it to summon up reinforcements.

*Let them summon all the host of Turan. We can still give them a battle those who survive it will not forget.*

The vanguard of the Turanians breasted the slope, and sunlight flamed

on mail sleeves as half a score of archers nocked and drew as one man.

The crimson glow spread from the cup until, to one looking into the chamber, the Lady might have seemed embedded in the heart of a gigantic ruby. Only her lips moved with the murmuring of her spell, and her breast with her shallow breathing. A keen eye might have seen a tremor in a finger or the muscle of one bare and supple thigh, but otherwise the Lady might have been the image of a sorceress at her magic, carved by a master sculptor.

A low-pitched thrumming began, at first seeming remote, then drawing closer, as if men bore toward the cave a great drum on which they were beating softly. The sound swelled until one would have said there was more than one drum.

Then came soft footsteps and what might have been a muffled cough. Two of the Maidens entered, leading between them one of the captives. The captive was a man of middle years, a hard-faced peasant with the hooked nose of the Kezankian hill folk and little hair on his parchment-hued scalp.

The captive's hands were bound behind his back with a rough but stout cord of marsh grass. Otherwise he wore nothing—not even the aspect of one awake and aware. His eyes were as vacant as a newborn babe's, shifted about altogether at random, and showed no animation even when their gaze fell upon the splendid form of the Lady of the Mist.

The Maidens themselves had now cast off their warriors' garb and wore only white silk loin-guards and, draped over one shoulder, long cords of the same marsh grass. Woven among the grass were amber-hued vines and woolen thread in all the colors ever imagined in the rainbow, let alone seen.

The Lady of the Mists now flung up both hands. A waterfall of sparks poured from her fingertips, silver blazing amidst the crimson. The sigil of Kull on the lid of the cup drew the sparks as a lodestone draws iron. They poured down upon it and vanished into it.

Another gesture by long-fingered, slender hands. The lid rose from the cup. Within lay fire of a crimson yet brighter than the glow filling the chamber. It might have been a blacksmith's forge heated to the utmost, yet neither smoke, heat, nor flame rose from the cup.

The Maidens saw the cup's fire with waking eyes, and blinked. The captive saw nothing, and only the gods knew what passed through as

much of a mind as the potion had left him.

If, that is, the gods had not altogether forsaken this cave, its invoking of ancient powers, and its tampering with the laws of both gods and men.

The sigil-marked lid rose higher, wafting toward the ceiling of the chamber as light as thistledown on the breeze, for all that it weighed more than a steel battle helm. A beckoning gesture from the Lady, and the captive took a step forward. Another gesture, another step.

Now he stood almost above the cup. The fire within it tinted his skin until he seemed a bronze statue. A third gesture, and the bindings unknotted themselves and fell to the floor. One of the Maidens stopped to pick them up.

As she straightened, the Lady made a final gesture. The captive bent over, and thrust both hands straight into the crimson fire blazing within the cup.

Still no smoke, still no flame, not the slightest reek of burning flesh. Yet the man stiffened as if he had been turned to stone. His eyes and mouth opened— and both blazed with the same crimson fire. His scant remaining hair rose on his scalp.

The Lady stood in glory and grace and rested both hands lightly on the captive's forehead. He shivered, as if responding to this last human touch—and then between one breath and the next, he was no more. For the space of another breath, a column of silver dust in the shape of a man stood before the Lady.

Then she flung her hands downward, fingers pointing at the cup. The dust leaped, losing human semblance. It rose to the ceiling, then poured down into the cup. The crimson fire within flickered briefly, seemed about to change color, then steadied at a gesture and two soft words from the Lady of the Mists.

The Lady resumed her seat, casting only a brief glance at the lid floating above, a briefer glance at the two Maidens. Her hands and lips moved briefly, in a silence wherein one might have imagined unwholesome beings from beyond the world listening— listening for the sound of prey, or the Lady's bidding.

If the Lady had ever held discourse with such, she did not do so now. Instead her bidding was to the Maidens. They knelt briefly before her, and she rested a hand on each smooth, youthful brow. Each woman shivered as with a light fever at her mistress's touch, then each rose with almost as much grace as hers and stepped backward out of the chamber.



The Lady took a deep breath, and this time her words were five, none of them soft. They were a command, in the language of Shem, a command to the Maidens waiting outside the chamber's door.

"Bring in the next sacrifice!" was the command of the Lady of the Mists.

## Two

Conan's band had borne a charmed life until now. But as the Afghulis breasted the slope, the first man went down. His name was Rastam, and he was old enough to have a son who had ridden beside him on a raid.

That was all the Cimmerian knew about the man, but it was enough that he would not die faceless and nameless among strangers. "Not even an enemy deserves such a fate, and ten times over not a man who has followed you," was a motto of Khadjar, once captain of Turanian irregular horse and giver of much wisdom to a certain young Cimmerian then new to the Turanian service.

Rastam's horse was dead, but the man himself only wounded. Through the dust Conan saw him roll clear of his stricken mount, leaving a trail of blood in the sand. Then he rose, casting aside a broken bow and drawing his tulwar.

The dust blinded the leading Turanian riders more than it did Conan, let alone Rastam. They were hard upon him before they saw him. A horse screamed and bucked convulsively as the Afghuli hamstrung it with the tulwar, then neatly slashed the falling rider's head from his shoulders.

A second Turanian rode up; Rastam leaped and dragged him from the saddle, and both men fell. Both stood, but Rastam had one arm around the other's neck and was holding him as a shield against Turanian arrows.

He cut two more foes out of the saddle and mutilated three horses before someone finally worked around behind him and put arrows into his back. Even then he had the strength to cut his living shield's throat before he died.

To the left Conan now saw a high but narrow gap in the rocks. The Afghulis had seen it, too, and were swerving hard in its direction. One mount lost its footing on a patch of loose stones. Its rider went down with it and did not move again after his mount lurched to its feet and hobbled off with its comrades.

Conan cursed in a fury at many things, not least of all himself. Had he parted with some of his jewels to buy camels for his band, they could have

crossed the desert far to the south, well away from Turanian patrols.

But what might have been could never now be. Conan had learned that early and often, so it was not in him to spend much time repining over mistakes. Besides, showing some of the jewels could well have made more than camel dealers profoundly curious about the northern giant's wealth. Also, the desert might hold no Turanians, but it still held more than a few nomads, unless one ventured so far south beyond the last oases that one had to cross the Devil's Anvil or other places where more travelers left their bones than reached their destinations.

The Cimmerian kept the mare moving while his eyes searched the rocks for a better refuge than the cleft. Behind those eyes was a hillman's blood and a seasoned warrior's experience, but they did not find what they sought.

"Dismount!" Conan shouted. He used a dialect of Afghuli that all of his band understood but few Turanians were likely to know. The pursuing foe was reining in and holding their distance, but they were still within hearing.

"Dismount!" he repeated, and gestured at the cleft. "Drive your horses within, then climb to where you overlook them. Archers, on guard."

Nods said that some understood the Cimmerian's plan. If the horses could not be taken to safety, then their next best use was as bait. Seeking to drive away their prey's mounts, the Turanians would be forced to come at them either up the steep slope or through the mouth of the cleft. If the first, then archers could play with them. If the second, then one man might bar the passage of a score.

Conan also knew who that one man must be. He flung himself out of the saddle, drawing his broadsword as he did. He snatched a short-handled axe from the saddle as he landed, then slapped the mare on the rump. She trotted off after the other horses.

A fool or two were still mounted, gaping about them so that Conan expected to see an arrow sprout from their throats at any moment. He opened his mouth to curse them, but Farad spoke first.

Or rather, he roared like an angry lion. "Sons of hornless rams and bald ewes, dismount and climb! We draw the Turanians in to their deaths. They are near-women, weaned on the vomit of diseased dogs. A few more dead and they will turn tail!"

Conan scarcely believed that himself and doubted that Farad did either. But the words made the last Afghulis dismount and begin to climb. As

they did, a bold Turanian rode toward the cleft—then pitched out of the saddle, dead before he struck the ground. A second arrow took his mount in the throat, and horse and would-be hero mingled their blood on the rocks.

At least one Afghuli archer had found a secure vantage and was using the height to give his shafts useful additional range. Conan saw the advancing Turanian line waver, then halt as if a ditch yawned fathoms deep before them. None wished to be the next to die; none doubted that there were enough archers ahead to bring death wherever they wished.

Perhaps the Turanians could be pricked by enough arrows into *acting* like the low creatures Farad had named them.

And perhaps whales might grow feathers.

More likely, the Turanians would surround the rocks at a safe distance and send messengers for aid. If they did not close in before the aid arrived—

Conan put the "ifs" firmly out of his mind as a score of Turanians dismounted and began to climb the slope on foot. Others shot from their saddles, aiming at the climbing Afghulis. Many arrows cracked and sparked on rocks. No Afghulis fell, and one man snatched up a double handful of arrows, then made a vulgar gesture with them at the archers below.

Sword in hand, Conan raced for the entrance to the cleft. Arrows now rose from the Turanian ranks, to whistle about his ears. None struck the swift-moving Cimmerian, and the arrows ended abruptly when two came down in the ranks of the Turanian foot. Curses now filled the air instead of arrows; and for a moment Conan dared hope that the Turanians would make war on one another.

The hope faded a moment later, but before it vanished, Conan had reached the mouth of the cleft and counted the horses within. Some bore wounds and all would need rest and, if possible, water before they could move on, but all lived. Then, moving swiftly, he sought a place to wait for the Turanians.

Conan did not have to wait for long.

The Lady of the Mists stared at the cup before her. It could only be a fanciful notion, or perhaps a sending of some hostile magic, that the cup was staring back at her.

Ten captives—ten vessels of the life essence was a better name for them

here and now—had stood before the Lady. All ten had given their life essence into what lay within the cup—and even the Lady did not care to search too hard for a name for that.

In magic, a true name commonly gave one power over him whose name one knew. With what lay within the cup, the Lady judged—nay, to be truthful, *feared*—that knowing its name would give it power, to reach out and command *her*.

What might come of that, she did not know, nor did she have the slightest wish to find out.

The Lady knelt, bowed her head, twined her fingers across her breasts, and touched the sigil-bearing cup lid with her thoughts. It wavered, then floated, still lightly as thistledown, to resume its place atop the cup. No sound came, not even the faintest rattle.

A bubbling sigh, as of some vast and unwholesome creature in its last moment of life, loud enough to raise echoes although there were none to give ear to them. Then the last of the crimson glow seemed to drain into the stone floor of the chamber, as if a cup of wine had been flung down upon sand.

The chamber returned to its natural colors, but the mind of the Lady of the Mists did not return to the natural world. She could not allow that until the ritual was altogether complete.

As the Mist took life essences into itself, it gained more and more awareness. Soon it would be able to touch the Lady's mind, or at least seek to do so. She knew quite well what could happen if it succeeded, and had therefore no intention of allowing this to happen. She might in time bind the Mist so that a linking of flesh-mind and Mist-mind would be prudent, but that time was far away.

The Lady rose and held both hands before her in a beckoning gesture. The two Maidens who had brought the cup entered the chamber, followed by two more, similarly clad.

The two newcomers brought long shoulder poles, from which hung a stout harness of leather that might have seemed gilded to an unknowing eye. The "gilding" was in truth the trace of a spell so old that no one could say what folk had first cast it. It bound what lay within the cup, and likewise the life essences, so that they might travel safely through the natural world outside the chamber to their destination.

The Maidens stood, two before and two behind, resting the poles on their shoulders. Then they closed their eyes, as the Lady of the Mists

raised her hands again, and this time chanted softly.

The cup lurched into the air, not light as thistledown now but more like a gorged vulture trying to find safety in the air as the hyenas approach. It lurched and wobbled from side to side as the Lady's magic commanded it across the spear's length of rock floor that separated it from the harness.

"*Huk!*" the Lady said. It was neither word, nor spell. It sounded more like the spitting of the king of all asps. The cup wavered once more, then settled into place in the harness.

Without anyone raising a hand, let alone setting it upon the leather, the harness wound itself tightly about the cup. In moments the contents could not have spilled had it been full to the brim with the finest Poitanian vintages.

There was no other way to deal with the cup when the life essences seethed within it. The Lady remembered one foolish Maiden, it seemed years ago, who had tried to steady the cup with her bare hand.

She drew back naught but a charred stump; and when she held the ruined limb close to her eyes, they smouldered and charred in their sockets too. She did not, however, die. There were in the end uses for her, even though she could not surrender her life essence to the Mist.

Her injuries had too greatly wounded her life essence, but she still had her life. Before it left her, many of the soldiers without had sated themselves so thoroughly that the mere thought of a woman was unknown to them for some days.

The four Maidens now bearing the cup seemed to have profited by their sister's fate. They stood as might temple images, waiting to come to life at a magical command.

The command came—once again, at the raised hand of the Lady of the Mists. The little procession strode out of the cave, the Maids falling swiftly into step as precisely as any soldiers, then turned right. Before them lay the path along the side of the valley, to the cave known as the Eye of the Mist.

Arrows cracked on the rocks at the entrance to the cleft as Conan shifted his position. He sought a place where he could see and strike without being seen or attacked, and so far, none had come to hand.

Meanwhile, arrows continued to fly. Those he could reach without exposing himself, the Cimmerian gathered up. He and his Afghulis had begun this race for life with full quivers. They had reached the rocks with

half-empty ones.

The Afghulis were returning the Turanian complements in kind. Some men and rather more horses fell on the slope. Riderless mounts careered about, tangling the ranks of those still mounted. The Afghulis might not be archers equal to the horsemen of Turan, but they held high ground that hid them while they shot down on men in the open.

No command made the Turanians withdraw, only the common consent of those at the forefront that they had fought enough for one day. The horsemen backed down the slope, like the tide ebbing from the harbor of Argos. They had the courage to keep their faces to the invisible enemy, for all that they left behind another half-score of comrades.

Some of the bolder spirits, who dismounted and took cover behind dead horses, paid for their courage within moments. Three died in the space of as many breaths, and Conan recognized the wild cry of triumph from above as issuing from Farad's throat.

The Turanian tide receded somewhat farther, not quite out of bowshot but far enough so that the archers above ceased shooting. Conan considered using some of his captured arrows to urge the enemy back even farther, then decided that wisdom lay elsewhere.

Sooner or later the Turanians would see the horses and nerve themselves to strike for them. Their hope would be to snatch the beasts and hold their enemies in place while reinforcements arrived.

Their fate would be to run the gauntlet of more arrows from on high, then to face a surprise encounter with the Cimmerian on ground of his own choosing. There would be fewer and more cautious Turanians after such an affray.

Conan set a dozen arrows within easy reach, then removed his boots for more silent movement. On the bare rock outside it was hot enough to bake bread or even burn his leather-tough feet, but here in the cleft, shadows made the rock bearable. He drew a whetstone and a wad of moss soaked in oil from a pouch on his belt and honed from the blade of his broadsword a few nicks that none but a seasoned warrior who was also the son of a blacksmith could have seen.

He was wary of turning his gaze from the Turanians, but thought the risk worth running. The Afghulis higher up the rocks would give sufficient warning of any attack for the Cimmerian to make ready for it.

His weapons prepared, Conan crept to a spot between two boulders and crouched there, as silent as a leopard watching a baboon's water hole and

as ready to strike. He saw the Turanians spreading out. He stood or squatted within bowshot, but behind such rocks and stunted trees as offered shelter.

The rest had drawn well back into the open. From the way they signaled by blasts of trumpets and wav-ings of banner, Conan judged that a good part of the band was out of sight, throwing a ring around the rocks—a ring their captain no doubt intended to hold the Afghulis as tightly as an iron collar held a slave.

With the back of his hand, Conan wiped sweat and dust from a scarred, muscle-corded neck that had in its time known a slave's collar as well as silken robes and the golden chains of honor. If fresh horsemen came up to replace the score or more dead or past fighting, the Turanians might do as they intended.

How best to draw them into an attack that would reduce their numbers and courage further? Conan examined the rocks at the mouth of the cleft with as much care as he would have considered the body of a woman waiting in his bed. Perhaps more—the rocks would not grow impatient if he looked too long without acting.

He counted the rocks that were loose, counted others that were small enough to lift or even throw, found some that were both. He turned his gaze to the slope. Then he lay on his back behind a rock that a battering ram could not have moved, cupped his hands about his mouth, and called to Farad.

"How fare you?" He spoke in a tongue of northern Vendhya not unknown to Farad or many other Afghulis, but rarely spoken in Turan.

"Well enough, Conan. We are only short of Turanian dogs we can kill easily."

There spoke the Afghuli warrior who would die rather than admit a weakness—one of many reasons why the Cimmerian found the Afghulis kindred spirits. The rocks aloft had to be hotter still than the slope, and the Afghulis had only a single water bottle apiece. Conan vowed that once the Turanians had been further bloodied enough to learn caution, he would search the cleft for some trace of a spring.

"I hope to do something about that before any of us are much older. How many do they have on the far side of the rocks?"

The sun was a trifle lower in the sky before Farad answered. It appeared that no one had thought to count the enemy behind. Conan hoped that the men above had at least a sentry or two watching their rear. One fault the

Afghulis had, and one reason they did not rule in Vendhya and Iranistan at least, was despising anyone not a hillman. They would not readily believe a Turanian could climb rocks, until he did so and opened their throats with a keen blade.

From Farad's answer, it seemed likely that the Turanians had lost one in three of their number in the chase, to say nothing of foundered horses and men bearing wounds that would drain strength if not life. If they lost as many again, their captain (if he lived) might not be able to hold them here long enough for help to arrive.

Even if they held, they would be spread thin. Too thin, the Cimmerian suspected, to resist a stealthy attack at night by men who were masters of fighting in the dark more than almost any other form of war.

Conan waited, as motionless and patient as if he had been one of the rocks himself. He wanted sun, thirst, wounds, and fear to play on the Turanians until their wits and limbs alike were less sound than before.

The sun had sunk beyond the crest of the rocks before Conan judged that the enemy was ready for his bait. Sheathing his sword and dagger but leaving bow and quiver, he crept farther into the cleft, close to the horses.

Even without water, the shade had done them some good. They stood quietly, staring at the Cimmerian. His mare raised her head with an all but human look of curiosity and boredom.

"Time to sing," Conan said. He raised his voice in a sharp, wordless command that any horse bred in these lands could understand. The mare tossed her head, dried foam flew, and she let out a sharp neigh.

By twos and threes, the other mounts joined in.

Conan bared his teeth, white in his dust-caked face, and scrambled back to his watching post.

The grin widened as he saw the Turanians coming to life, some of them leaping up as if they'd lain on ants' nests. The Afghulis above held their fire.

The Turanians knew where the bait was. Now, to get them to take it.

## **Three**

The four Maidens bearing the wine cup marched in step ahead of the Lady of the Mists. This was not easy, as their feet were as bare as the rest of them, but they neither stumbled nor missed a step.



The punishments for Maidens who transgressed were not as grave as those for common folk. The Lady knew that she needed the Maidens' wits and steel alike on guard against her enemies. The Maidens knew that the Lady valued them, and they in turn valued her rewards even more than they feared her punishments.

The peace between the Lady of the Mists and those who served her was uneasy, as often as not. But its uneasiness had not ruined it in three years. No one expected a civil brawl in the valley now, when rumor had it that the Lady's dreams were close to fruition.

Dreams that would make all her friends powerful, even wealthy beyond mortal dreams, and her enemies tormented, shrieking souls beyond all mortal fears.

The Lady walked behind the Maidens, her hands clasped before her slim waist. She was clad as she had been while she drew the life essence of the captives into the cup. She walked with a dignity that seemed to dare the rocks to bruise her bare feet, or the breeze that crept into the valley with the lengthening shadows to chill her bare skin.

She and the Maidens alike walked as if the presence or absence of clothing was beneath their notice and should be likewise beneath the notice of any who saw the women pass. Once only had some foolish soldier ventured a bawdy remark at this procession of well-formed women. His tongue had quite literally cleaved to the roof of his mouth, and only when it was black and stinking did the spell binding it break.

By then, of course, the festering in his mouth had reached his brain. He died raving, and those who heard him lived on with a new respect for the sorcerous power and woman's willfulness of the Lady of the Mists.

The path from the cave ran straight back along the north wall of the valley for some seven furlongs. In places it ran along a ledge carved from the living rock of the Kezankian Mountains. In other places the ledge was built up upon the rock. Sometimes it was built of stones as large as a shepherd's hut, holding together without mortar. In other places curiously thin bricks rose, layer upon layer.

One did not need to count the patches of lichen and hardy vine, silver-shot moss and ancient trees, dwarfed by wind and cold and gnarled by poor soil, to tell that the path was ancient work. An outsider who entered the valley and lived to study it might have offered many different notions about the builders of the path. All would have been partly right, all likewise partly wrong.

At the far end of the path, a flight of wooden steps led down a

near-vertical slope, some eighty paces high. Beside the steps a stout wooden beam with a pulley and ropes dangling from it projected out over the drop. The Maidens tied the wine cup, poles, netting, and all, to the pulley, then two of them descended the steps. Their mistress followed, then the cup, lowered on the pulley, and at last the two remaining Maidens, after they had wound in the rope.

All five women ignored the images carved on a smooth rock face just above the wooden beam. All had seen them a score of times, and the Maidens were ignorant of their meaning.

The Lady of the Mists was not ignorant. She knew the marks of the long-dead Empire of Acheron, whose magic yet lived in barbaric corners of the world or in the hands and spells of the mad and the unlawful. She did not care to dwell too long on what these Acheronian carvings might mean.

The Lady of the Mists had many vices, but she was not so foolish as to cast spells with a mind unsettled by shadows of ancient evil.

The women gathered at the bottom of the steps. From where they stood, a path of gravel bordered by more of the curiously thin bricks led off along the floor of the valley. The Maidens lifted the cup and fell into step, while the Lady cast a quick glance into a narrow cleft in the rock at the foot of the stairs.

In that cleft night held sway at all times, but enough light crept in to show the whiteness of bleached bones within. Even without the bones, the distant but unmistakable reek of rotting flesh made nostrils wrinkle and told anyone passing by what lay within.

What came of the life essence of those whose remains lay within, the Lady trusted that she knew. There could be none other within the valley save the Mist itself, or there would be a battle from which the stars and the gods might shrink in dismay.

As to the fate of a mortal, even a sorceress, caught in such a battle, it was better not to think of such things if one needed sharp wits and untroubled sleep.

For the first few hundred paces, the path ran through stony but well-wooded land. Closely set young pines mingled their acrid scent with the softer aroma wafting from a few colossal cedars, each of which might have yielded timber enough to build an entire temple. They reared above the pines like stags above a pack of wolves, and no one who saw them needed to be told that they had stood far longer.

Beyond the trees the path wound back and forth along the floor of the valley, between terraced fields mingled with huts and more stands of timber. Twilight had already come to the valley; it was hard to make out clearly the forms of those who worked in the fields or chopped wood in the shadow of the trees.

Nor would anyone have been the worse for not seeing clearly those who served in the Valley of the

Mists. Their human semblance did not survive a close look.

At last the path began to rise, past a walled collection of thatched stone huts that almost deserved the name of a village. Here the sentries on the wall had the shape of true men, and hailed the Lady of the Mists with gestures that had been old when the priests of Stygia first tamed their sacred serpents.

Beyond the village the path became a flight of stone steps. As the crests of the mountains to the north began to show the ruddy hues of late afternoon, the five women reached a boulder, tall as two men. On the boulder was daubed, in rough vegetable colors, a crimson eye surrounded by blue swirls.

Beyond the boulder the mouth of yet another cave yawned. Within lay the Eye of the Mist.

Conan did not doubt that if waiting alone was needed, he and his Afghulis had the advantage today. The Turanians lay or stood under the desert sun, baking like flatbread on a griddle, unable to move a finger without being observed. Conan and the Afghulis had concealment, and some at least had shade.

The besiegers might have more water than the besieged; but in this desert, waterskins swiftly ran dry even among the finest regular soldiers. Irregulars would be dry-throated before dawn, with no recourse but to send out a watering party and divide their strength, or else lift the siege.

But the outcome of this siege did not depend on who could squat the longest on hot rock or yet hotter sand. It would depend on whether Conan's band could win free before the Turanians brought up new strength. Then they could hold the Afghulis besieged for weeks or overwhelm them in a single desperate assault, spending lives to save time.

Conan did not think much of the sort of captain who tossed away the lives of his men like a drunkard pissing in the streets. But he also knew far too well that the gods did not always reward virtue, whether in war, love,

or thievery.

The Turanians had to be drawn into an attack.

Conan uncoiled, as stealthily as any prowling serpent of the priests of Set. He flattened himself against the side of the cleft and gripped a well-shaped stone the size of a swan's egg.

"Ho, Turanian dogs!" he shouted. "Have any of you the courage to face men? Or did your weaning on vulture's spew take away your manhood?"

Conan went on in similar vein, until among the Turanians heads bobbed up from behind bushes or turned toward the rocks. A sergeant cursed those who had let themselves be baited, and advanced to push them down again.

From aloft, an arrow whistled down, taking the sergeant in the throat. He clawed at the jutting shaft, gobblings turning into chokings as the blood welled up in his throat, then fell backward to kick briefly before life departed.

That was one less leader to force wisdom down the dry throats of foolish Turanians. Soon there might be none to hold back the besiegers from a desperate attack, or rally them when the Afghulis repelled that attack.

Curses and a few arrows replied to the sergeant's death. One Turanian showed folly at once, leaping up to aim his shaft. Conan's heavy-thewed right arm flashed around like the lash of a drover's whip. The stone flew, not as straight as it might have from a sling, but straight enough to strike the Turanian's chest.

Also hard enough to shatter his ribs and drive their jagged ends into his heart. He took longer to die than the sergeant, but his life had just as thoroughly departed when a comrade rushed out to drag the body to shelter.

Loyalty bought only death. Three Afghulis shot together, two hit, and the loyal comrade was dead before he had stretched his length on the sand beside his friend.

From high above, Farad's voice chanted an old Afghuli verse, in honor to a worthy foe. Conan wished Mitra's favor for the dead Turanian—if Mitra or any other god cared much about how men died or had aught to do with their fate once dead.

He also wished the Turanians would either charge or flee. This endless waiting was no pleasure to him either. The sooner this came to strokes at close quarters, the better.

Conan squinted and shaded his eyes with his hand against the glare of the sun. He was seeking the captain, to see how much command he had over his men.

He found the captain swiftly, but for a long time after that, the captain showed all the animation of a temple image. At least it seemed a long time. Flies drawn by the sweat on the Cimmerian's scarred torso buzzed and stung, but he dared not slap at them, for fear the movement might draw a wild shot.

Then movement rippled along the Turanian lines, both the outer one in the distance and the hidden men closer to hand. From the outer line a drum thudded. Another drum replied, not an echo. For a moment Conan feared that the Turanian reinforcements had already arrived.

Then, from the same direction as the second drum, Turanian war cries rose into the sky. The drum redoubled its beat; a horn joined it. From above, Farad's voice howled defiance, wordless but eloquent.

Conan cursed, dry-mouthed. That Turanian captain had more wits than the Cimmerian had thought. He was launching one attack to draw the archers above. Next had to come an attack against Conan himself.

So be it. Even without the bows playing on them from above, the Turanians were about to learn more than was likely to please them about the perils of fighting desperate men.

No steps or path led to the cave of the Eye. Only bare ground lay beneath the women's feet, but ground beaten almost as hard as rock by many feet over the past three years (also, the Lady did not doubt, by feet past counting over years equally beyond her power to number).

The wide mouth of the cave narrowed swiftly to a passage so low that two of the Maidens' hair brushed the ceiling. Rock dust powdered their tresses, and small stones and the bones of bats and other dwellers in darkness crunched underfoot.

No light reached the tunnel once they were beyond the light from the cave mouth. Nor did they light torches. They had been this way many times, the Lady and her Maidens, and the path to the Eye held no surprises. Nor could it grow any, with the Lady's magic searching ahead.

Only the eye of the Lady's memory saw the carvings on the walls. To an uninitiated eye and mind, they might have appeared natural formations, eroded into their bizarre and twisted shapes by water over the aeons. To the Lady's eye, which had looked upon them in full light only once, they

spoke of the work of hands so ancient that they might not have been altogether human.

Men—no, *beings*—with minds and skilled hands had dwelled in this and other caves in the Kezankian Mountains when other men were laying the foundations of Atlantis. "Kull of Atlantis" was a name that conjured up vistas of unbelievable antiquity, but when these carvings took shape, Kull's most remote ancestor had yet to see the light of day.

The chill breath of the cave wafting from the bowels of the mountains had no power against the Lady, for all that she remained as bare as ever. The thought of the weight of years pressing down upon her did give her a chill, the kind of chill to the heart and soul that neither hearth-fire nor posset cup can ease.

None of this showed in her steady pace or her straight back. She might have been a figure of ivory or alabaster in some buried temple.

Then the five women came out of the darkness into the light—the light of the Eye. It was a crimson light, subtly different from the light within the cup, as two rubies may differ one from the other. It flowed upward as if it had been a liquid from a hole in the floor of a rock chamber some thirty paces wide.

The hole was half a man's height in width, and the rock around its rim was worn away to glassy smoothness that made for treacherous footing. This did not halt or even slow the steady pace of the five women. They marched straight up to the rim. The Lady raised a hand, and the Maidens halted, then turned to stand two on each side of the hole.

Now the cup hung suspended over the hole—and was the lid rattling faintly, like distant bones tossed by the wind? Did what lay within the Eye call to what lay within the cup? The Lady knew that in this place it was both easy and perilous to imagine sounds beyond the ear and sights beyond the eye.

Another gesture seemed to turn the Maidens to statues. Only the slightest rise and fall of their breasts said that they yet lived. A third gesture, and the cup lifted from the leather net and rose into the air.

It had barely risen above the Maidens' heads when they came to life, drawing aside and back with more haste than dignity. No command reached them; none was needed. They had not been among those who saw the fate of a Maiden who was a laggard in drawing away from the Eye, but all of the Maidens had heard the tale.

They had heard how the Mist rose from the Eye before the Maiden was

beyond its reach. They had heard of how obscenely it dealt with her, as though it had the mind of a mad executioner. They had, above all, heard how she screamed as she died.

The Maidens withdrew all the way to the mouth of the tunnel, leaving the Lady alone with the cup and the crimson incandescence from the Eye. She sat down, cross-legged, as ever insensible of cold stone against her flesh, and raised both hands. She also closed her eyes. Even guarded by sorcery, mortal eyes were not meant to see what came next.

The crimson light grew stronger. Now it gave a demonic hue to the flesh of the Lady and her Maidens. There were no words in lawful tongues to describe what it did to the cup and above all to the sigil-bearing lid.

The light also drove every vestige of darkness from the chamber. In that hellish illumination, one might have seen that the walls of the chamber were as bare as the Lady, but too smooth to be the work of nature. Here again was the work of races long dead, and perhaps leaving the world the better for their passing.

The light began to dance, and at the same time turn color. The crimson faded, and an unwholesome shade of purple took its place. Then the purple faded to a livid blue that might have seemed natural had it not swirled and danced like a mist being blown away by a strong wind. The Mist rose the height of two men from the Eye, but did not reach a finger's breadth over the edge of the hole.

The Mist might have been held within a bottle of marvelously clear glass, except that nothing confined it save the Lady's magic—and perhaps the will of the Mist of Doom.

The Lady was now as devoid of the power to move or speak as the Maidens were. In this moment her magic passed directly from her mind to the Mist, or not at all. With arts learned long ago and in great suffering, she drove down to the lowest levels of her mind any fear of what might happen if the Mist did not respond as it had in the past.

In the next moment, the Lady's fear and the cup alike were gone. The Mist whirled until it seemed only a column of blue light rising from the Eye. Then it shot up until it reached the ceiling and sprayed across it, more like a jet of water than something as intangible as mist.

The cup burst aloft with the rising Mist. It was still beyond the Lady to move, but she turned the focus of her mind from the Mist to the cup. She shaped her will into invisible fingers, slid them under the cup, and held it as the Mist drew back into the Eye.

Only then was the bond broken, and the Lady able to use her body, limbs and mouth alike, to conjure the cup to a gentle landing. It was some while before the Maidens came out to pick it up, because they had to wait until the Lady herself ceased trembling.

When they had the cup safely within the net again, they gathered around their mistress. They did not need to speak, only lift her gently and guide her back to the tunnel. Perhaps one of them might have looked at the rock pressing down overhead and uttered a short prayer to her patron gods that they all live to stand under the open sky again.

If they did, it did not concern the Mist of Doom.

Enough time for a hasty meal had already crawled by, the slower for the sun. Soon it would be long enough for a banquet since the Turanians at Conan's rear had attacked, and still those before him remained low or out of bowshot.

Conan wondered if some cunning climber among the Turanians had found a way up the far side of the rocks and led his comrades into a battle at close quarters. Or at least high enough to lie in wait, ready to swarm forward when their comrades attacked from the south.

They would learn a harsh lesson about attacking hillmen among rocks if they had been so bold. But teaching that lesson might well keep the Afghulis too busy to help Conan.

He was about to call up to Farad, to bid him scout the north face of the rocks, when a trumpet sounded far to the Turanian right, out of Conan's sight. A brazen reply floated on the breeze from the left, the trumpeter as invisible as his comrade.

Plain to anyone but a blind man was a score or more of Turanians gathering themselves to plunge forward in a desperate attack. Conan had barely finished counting them when he saw a half-score of horsemen caracoling just outside bowshot. At first he thought the reinforcements had arrived. Then he recognized some of the Turanians' headdresses.

The mounted men, it seemed, were a second wave, to follow on the heels of the first one. Conan's respect for the enemy captain rose higher. A good plan—if the first wave could ever be persuaded to move forward.

Then in the next moment that work of persuasion was done, and the Turanians leaped from cover and ran toward the rocks. Conan nocked an arrow, shot, nocked another, shot it, and was nocking a third when arrows from above tumbled two more Turanians in the sand.



That made one in five down before they even reached close quarters, but no more arrows came from above and the Turanians came on as if a purse of gold lay ahead or demons snapped at their heels. Conan continued shooting. The Turanians were coming as straight toward him as if the rocks were glass or a tavern dancer's veils, covering all, concealing nothing.

One more Turanian fell, but to no mortal hurt; he unslung his bow and began scattering arrows about the rocks above Conan's head. His comrades ran on—and now from above, Conan heard familiar Turanian war cries, Afghuli curses, and oaths in the tongues of more than a few other folk.

The Turanian host was like the gallows—it refused no man who came to it. Conan owed his own career in Turan to that habit.

Only moments after battle was joined above, it was joined below. The remaining Turanians crossed to the foot of the rocks unmolested from above. Now even an Afghuli with no foes closer to hand could hardly strike at them, or they at him.

The bow had not, however, made other and more ancient weapons harmless. How many rocks the Afghulis had piled ready, Conan did not know, but they seemed to rain from the sky. Three Turanians went down, two rose again, and one of these died as Conan flung a smaller stone to crack his skull.

Now the Cimmerian's long legs drove his feet against one of the boulders placed ready. It squealed like a slaughtered pig as it rubbed past another rock, then reached the open slope and began to roll.

Before it was well launched, Conan threw his feet against a second boulder. Then a third, and on to a fourth that needed one foot and both arms. Even the Cimmerian's thews strained at the last rock, fresh sweat made slime of the dust on his forehead, and for a dreadful moment it seemed that the boulder would be his match.

Then it followed the others. Conan leaped back as arrows whistled through the space he had occupied. He had just time to see half the Turanians scattering before the onslaught of the boulders, before the vanguard of the other half reached him.

Now it was the deadliest kind of close-quarters fighting, with all the art of a tavern brawl but much more steel and therefore far more bloodshed. Conan had two aims: to kill as many Turanians as he could, and to keep the fight so tangled that no Turanian with a bow could end the fight with a single arrow.

Conan had not despised bowmen as cowards even before he learned the art of the bow, for the art of the sling was well-known in his native land. But no one could doubt that a well-aimed shaft had brought many a fine swordsman to an untimely end.

Conan would accept his end when the gods called him to it. But their call would reach him among the ranks of his enemies, sword in hand.

The Cimmerian had a head's advantage in height and two spans in reach over the stoutest of his opponents. Add that his broadsword was better fitted for this battle than the tulwars of Turan, and ten-to-one odds were not so long as they might have seemed.

Conan hewed the sword arm from his first opponent and sundered the skull of the second. Both fell so as to block the narrow passage to the Cimmerian for those behind. The first one to hesitate did so within reach of the Cimmerian's sword, and died of that mistake. Two others leaped free with only minor wounds, but barred a clear shot to archers behind.

Conan feared that this good fortune would not last; now more than ever he would not assume his foes were witslings. So he took the fight to the enemy, closing the distance to the two nearest in a single leap.

He struck them with as much force as a boulder. One man toppled against the rock wall, hard enough to knock himself senseless. Conan kicked the other, hard enough to double him over. A tulwar fell from one hand, a dagger from the other, and the man himself fell on top of them when the Cimmerian split his skull with a down-cut.

Another Turanian leaped up to contest the rock with Conan. Now blood from the already fallen flowed over it, making it slick. The Cimmerian was a hillman of the breed of whom it is said they have eyes in their feet. He knew how to keep his footing on slippery rock, and make an opponent lose his.

The Turanian tried to grapple, praying aloud, clearly hoping to take Conan down with him. Conan slapped the man across the temple with the flat of his sword, weakening his grip. That weakened grip let the Cimmerian draw his dagger and thrust fiercely upward. The Turanian howled and flew backward from the rock, propelled by a kick that added further ruin to his belly and groin.

He struck a comrade, again with the force of a boulder, and both men went down. Conan reached them before the unwounded Turanian could rise, stamped on his chest hard enough to shatter ribs, then fended off two and killed one enemy seeking to drag the fallen clear.

Arrows again whistled and clattered. One ripped the skin over his ribs, deep enough that blood flowed freely over the dust and the scars. The wound would hardly slow him and might not even add a fresh scar, but he was reminded that he now stood in the open. He had routed or slain all the Turanians who shielded him from their comrades' arrows. Now he had to either push forward to bring the fight back to close quarters, or withdraw.

A look down the slope told him the wisdom of withdrawing. The first wave of Turanians was out of the fight, and the survivors of the second showed no disposition to close. Three of them had fallen to the boulders, which had also crushed the life out of the archer the Afghulis had wounded. The others retained some cunning with the bow but no heart for pushing the fight to swords' reach of the Cimmerian.

Another arrow nicked Conan's left calf as he returned to his refuge. He had taken worse hurts in a friendly wrestling bout, but they reminded him that the Afghulis above might not have fared as well. That no arrows had come down from above during his own grapple with the Turanians might mean sundry things, but none of them good.

"Ho!" he called, in the same dialect he had used before. "How are matters with you?"

"Assad is dead and Kurim is hurt past fighting. None of us are whole. Those Turanian dogs climbed the rocks as if they were men, but we taught them otherwise."

"How many learned the lesson?"

"A few short of fifty."

"I didn't know you could count that high, O brother of a camel!"

Silence, then Farad said, "More than ten, for we have counted that many bodies and some rolled back down."

On the Cimmerian's reckoning, the Turanians had lost another third of their strength. Ride out now, while the Turanians were shaken and weak, or wait until night, when darkness would hide tracks and coolness ease the horses?

"Can the hurt ride now?"

"Best wait for dark. I will leave none save Assad, and not even he if we can. Rastam and Jobir are already down among those dogs, prey to their godless rites."

Conan knew the sound of an Afghuli who would not be moved from his

decision. To his mind, riding out now made better sense, giving the Turanians no chance to bring up reinforcements.

Out of care for his men, Farad clearly thought otherwise. Question the Afghuli further, and the Cimmerian might have to leave this loyal band to keep Farad's knife out of his back some night farther on the road to Koth. One could ask only so much of any Afghuli if one was not of his tribe.

So be it. They would all ride that road together, or remain here on the rocks with a good guard of Turanians to help them greet the vultures.

## **Four**

The western horizon swallowed the sun. Swiftly the last light of day drained from the sky. The peaks of the Kezankian Mountains turned purple, then gray under the starlight.

A natural mist veiled the entrance to the Lady's valley as Muhbaras walked down to his tent. Or at least it was a mist that he could persuade himself was work of the mountain night and not of the Lady's magic.

Reason warred and would continue to war against ancient tales of the mighty magic lurking in these mountains—magic of which the Lady might have a sadly imperfect command. The captain had first heard those tales from his nursemaid, but later years had brought to his ears other versions of them, so that he doubted they were altogether an old woman's fancies.

Meanwhile, he had been given orders and men with which to carry them out, as an alternative to a more permanent exile or some harsher fate. He doubted that he himself would ever see Khoraja again, but he could not throw away his men out of his own despair.

So he would do his duty of the night, and sleep, to make ready for whatever might be the duties of the day.

The rocks returned the heat of day to the night sky arching above them. Within the ravine the horses stirred uneasily. A pebble fell from high above, followed by two more. Then one by one, the last four Afghulis scrambled down the rocks.

One of them had a dead comrade's headdress wrapped around his arm as a bandage. He also showed dark beads of blood on his lower lip, where he had bitten it to stifle a cry of pain.

The Afghulis gathered around Conan, eyes gleaming in their dark faces.

They had braided their beards and tied them roughly with scraps of cloth, then drawn scarves over their necks and chins. That was the Afghuli mark of having sworn to conquer or to die.

Conan had sworn no such oath. Indeed, he had seldom fought any other way, and it was not in him to do so tonight. The greatest kindness the Turanians might show him was a quick death, and that, he could always procure for himself.

"Anyone who has water, give it to your horse."

Conan said. "Archers, don't shoot unless you have a good mark, and take a horse before you take a rider."

The Afghulis nodded. Conan hardly doubted that he was telling them what they already knew, and that they needed no reassurance, he knew as well. But a chief among the Afghulis always spoke to his assembled men before the battle, if only to prove that fear had not dried his tongue past speaking.

"If we are divided, the meeting place is at the Virgin's Oasis." He gave distances and landmarks, then asked, "Questions?"

Farad spoke up. "Yes. Whenever did the gods allow a woman to come into this desert and remain a virgin?"

"A long time ago, or so I've heard," the Cimmerian replied. "Men were less than they are today, in that time, and of course, none of them were Afghulis."

Bawdy laughter all but raised echoes, so that Conan held a finger to his lips. "The Turanians are not all asleep, and not all who wake are fools. Speed and silence now, or we'll keep our lost comrades company."

In silence the Afghulis bowed, then turned to tend their horses.

Only the dead remained high on the ridge, hands stiffening over the hilts of daggers thrust between their ribs according to the Afghuli custom. Thus the harsh gods of that still harsher land would know that a friend's steel had pierced their hearts, and that their ghosts would be friends to the living, even watchful on their behalf.

If the ghosts of the Afghulis' dead watched this night, they saw nothing, or at least sent no word to their living friends. Below on the desert, neither Afghuli nor Cimmerian saw shadows creep across a distant sand dune, then sink silently to rest. They did not see a messenger slipping away from the outer line of the watching Turanians, also creeping shadowlike until he

was beyond seeing from the rocks.

Far out beyond the crests, only ghosts might have seen him mount a horse held ready by four riders who bore the lances and shields of Turanian regular cavalry and the colors of the crack Greencloaks. Only ghosts might have seen him ride off into the night, until he met a slim, youthful-looking Turanian captain not far from where the shadows had come to rest.

And only ghosts might have heard his message to the captain, or noted the captain's thin face split briefly in a wry grin.

Three Afghuli archers climbed on the highest boulders remaining after the battle. They were fewer in number and with less command of the slope below than Conan could have wished. But he now led fewer than he had at dawn, and of those, not all were fighting-fit. Warriors did the best they could with what they had, and if the end came sooner because what they had was not enough—

Conan asked two Afghulis to repeat the directions to the Virgin's Oasis. They both knew the way. Then he scrambled onto the boulders with the archers, as Farad led the others out into the open.

Neither drums, trumpets, showers, nor even the mating-cat squall of a frightened sentry greeted the Afghulis' appearance. It began to seem that they would either enjoy good luck or face a trap.

Conan swallowed a Cimmerian war cry. Glad to defy alert opponents, he refused to alert sleeping ones. Instead he slapped Farad's mount on the rump and swung into his own saddle. He raised one hand in a cheerfully obscene Afghuli gesture, waited until the three archers scrambled down and mounted, then spurred his horse forward.

The riders streamed down the slope at a brisk trot, raising a ghostly cloud of dust. In the chill of the desert night, the breath of men and horses added will-o'-the-wisps of vapor to the dust.

They passed dead men lying stiff and silent, doomed men still moaning against their coming death, and a few who Conan thought might have been shamming. There was no time to send those last to join their comrades, for all that this would leave them alive in the riders' rear. This was a ride for life. If it became a battle, it would most likely be one lost because it took place at all!

Once they were clear of the shadow of the rocks, the moon gave enough light to permit avoiding holes and cracks in the ground. They held their

speed down to a trot. The horses might not be able to keep up a canter. If they could, best to save it for when the Turanians sighted them. The Turanians could not have drawn back so far that even by night the escape would remain forever invisible.

Or could they? As one rise gave way to another without an attack or even a warning cry, Conan began to wonder. His band had punished the Turanians soundly in today's fighting. Had they drawn off to lick their wounds while they waited for reinforcements?

A trap still seemed more likely, but there seemed no need to warn his men. The Afghulis appeared more alert than ever, riding with bows strung or tulwars drawn, eyes ceaselessly roaming the night, heads turning at any slight sound heard above the thud of the horses' hooves.

They had been moving now for long enough to empty a jug of wine worth savoring. Conan felt a familiar itch between his shoulder blades that hinted of danger close in time and space. He raised a hand, and the Afghulis reined in and gathered around him.

Night-keen eyes roamed again, studying every hillock and the mouth of every ravine for signs of lurking danger. Only a dry wash was too deep in shadow to spy out. Conan studied it until he was sure that he saw something move within the shadows, and was equally sure that it was only his imagination. He had stood sentry too often not to know that the night will listen to a man's fears and, if he stares into it long enough, show his what is not there.

Conan pointed toward the north, away from the wash. "I want to ride well clear of that. Men on that flank, grow some more eyes if you can. Otherwise you may never see the Virgin's Oasis, let alone a living virgin!"

Low chuckles rose into the night along with the steam from the horses, and the band moved off again.

The young captain cursed softly at the noise the sentries made sending the message. Their quarry might not be as desert-wise as Turanian veterans, but they were seasoned warriors and no fools in any kind of land.

Then he cursed again at the message. The Afghulis were indeed no fools, and they had a very watchful and longheaded warrior leading them, even if he were not the man the captain thought he was. Two of the three bands the captain had placed ready would now find it hard to come up with the Afghulis.

The captain was not much of a one for prayer, as few gods promised

much (their priests promised more, but who could trust a priest?), and fewer still kept their promises. However, he did briefly ask Mitra to consider his probable fate if tonight more of his men died trying to take alive the wrong man.

The Afghulis' leader certainly seemed to be the one the captain sought. But the captain had not been able to get a true and complete description of the leader. Part was because few of the men who had a close look at him yet lived. Part was not wishing to raise suspicions of the leader's identity in the minds of the captain's own men.

It would not matter that the reason for which the captain wished the man taken alive served Turan. Accusations of treason floated about freely now in the kingdom, like rotten lilies in the scum atop a stagnant pond. Even if the charge stopped short of treason— popular, because it carried the death penalty, and the captain had enemies who would not sleep easy as long as he lived—it could mean demotion.

That in turn could mean a choice between returning to his family's estates, and living there until some further intrigue snatched him away, or a post counting horseshoes and saddle blankets so far to the south that the nomads spoke Iranistani. Here was a post of honor, more honorable still in that he commanded Greencloaks and had won their respect. He would not part with it alive.

The desert breeze did blow through the captain's mind one final thought. If the man leading the Afghulis was the one the captain sought, the matter of life or death might not be altogether the captain's choice. He had seen the man fight years ago, and by all reports, he was as hardy as ever and seasoned by many more battles and journeys during those years.

The captain put an end to his fretting and raised his lance. Beside him a sergeant raised his lance, with a small one-eye lantern dangling from the tip like a pennon.

Three hills away, a similar lantern glimmered against the stars, then faded as its bearer turned away, to pass the signal on. The captain waited until the soft jingle of harness and taut, shallow breaths around him told of veterans ready to ride out.

Then the captain drove in his spurs, and his horse surged down the wash as clouds drifted toward the moon.

Conan cursed briefly, but this time not softly, as the riders swarmed out of the wash. It was no comfort to have been right when it was too late for



being right to matter.

He would have cursed again, but he had better uses for his breath at this moment, and besides, he feared to dishearten the Afghulis. Stout warriors as they were, they were also at the end of their endurance. What small hope they had of winning free now depended on every man fighting so that the first few enemies to come within his reach died swiftly and bloodily.

After that, the new Turanians might be as disheartened as the old ones.

And elephants might turn purple—in the daylight, in the sight of sober men.

Conan pulled the mare's head toward the left. The right of a line might be the post of honor in civilized hosts, but here was neither civilization nor host. The post of honor was that closest to danger, and to enemies who would feel the Cimmerian's steel before either he or they died.

"Spurs in, swords out, and heads down!" he called, as he drew up in the leftmost place.

"What—?" someone began. Someone else snarled in wordless fury, at the folly of not seeing that the time for arguing was past.

The first speaker fell silent. Then there was no human sound from Conan's band, or at least none heard over the thud of the hooves, the panting of the horses through flared nostrils, and the rising thunder of the pursuing Turanians.

It was a long bowshot even for the best archer, and night shooting was a chancy business when arrows were scant. Before long the clouds reaching out for the moon blotted out the silver-sheened disk and a deeper darkness fell over the desert. Now the race for life was up to the horses.

No Afghuli horses had fallen, but half were staggering and foam-flecked, when Conan heard a war trumpet cry out to the stars from behind his band. Then the desert night grew colder, a coldness that thrust into his bowels like an enemy's spear, when he heard the trumpet answered ahead.

It was some distance off, as far as the Cimmerian's keen and seasoned ears could judge, but it surely lay across the Afghulis' path to whatever safety the open desert might offer tonight. Now the Turanians would not even have to wolf-pack their prey. They could close and crush by sheer weight of numbers, once they had blocked the path.

Conan's eyes searched the shadows, looking for even a few scattered rocks that might help in a last stand. They faced nothing better, but it mattered to him how many foes he took with him, and the Afghulis were

warriors of the same stamp.

Nothing but sand and gravel revealed itself, dunes swelling and sinking down to washes and ravines too shallow to hide a mounted man. The clouds held their veil over the moon; everything beyond half-bowshot vanished in the shadows even to Conan's keen night-sight.

Both horns sounded again, and both now closer. Conan listened, trying to judge if the Turanians ahead were drawing across his path, or were still off to one flank. If they were on one flank, and either good going for the horses or cover for the men lay on the other—

Conan's ears searched the night, and he realized that he had clutched his sword hilt so tightly that his nails dented the shagreen grip. Then he laughed, and no sane man would have heard that laugh without fear colder than the night, for it held a Cimmerian's battle rage.

The Turanians ahead were still some ways to the left of the path of Conan's band. In the darkness, they might not realize this until it was too late. The trap had been well set and now was truly sprung, but might it not be too weak to hold such formidable prey?

This might be whistling into the desert wind, but Conan held that thought in his mind as a starving wildcat grips a squirrel. He had led too often to doubt that in such moments the men of a war band could all but read their leader's thoughts. They had best read hope and courage there, or the battle was lost before it was fairly joined.

The ground to the right did lie open, but it also rose steeply between two shallow ridges. Conan's eyes raked the ridge crests, found nothing up there, but then saw an Afghuli's mount stumble. The rider bent over to whisper encouragement and at the same time apply the spur, but the horse was spent. It went down, flinging its rider clear. The horseman leapt to his feet, darted for one of the spare mounts, gripped the saddle, and swung himself into it without the fresh horse missing a step.

"Ya-haaaaa!" Conan shouted. With such men under him, the Turanians would have another battle to remember before they shoveled him under the sand or left him for the vultures. They might even win free, if they reached the top of the slope and found no enemies there.

The Afghulis reached the top of the slope, but in no way fit to flee beyond it. The climb had been too much for their horses, one of whom flung its rider off at once. Conan heard the deadly thud of a skull striking rock, and saw that the man did not move after he fell.

"Ya-haaaaa!" Conan shouted again, and wheeled his mount. Beyond the

ridges to either side lay darkness and perhaps ground fit to conceal a man on foot. This was no desert for a man on foot, unless he was as hardy as an Afghuli and as ready to make those pursuing him wary of closing.

But there was only one way to buy time for the Afghulis, and only one man fit to pay the price. Conan's horse staggered as he brutally jerked her head around, until she was facing down the slope. Then he drove in his spurs.

As his charge gathered way, he heard a voice rise above the hoof thunder of the onrushing Turanians. Half-lost in the blare of trumpets, it seemed from all sides, it yet sounded curiously familiar. But the man whose name the voice conjured up would never have given such a mad order as the one Conan heard now.

"Take the big one alive, at all costs!"

Someone cared little for the lives of his men tonight or their obedience tomorrow, if he thought that would be an easy task against the Cimmerian.

In the next moment the night seemed to turn solid with the onrushing shapes of mounted men. They bore lances, and crouched in the saddle both to protect themselves and to thrust low. They did not succeed in doing the first. Conan cut five men out of the saddle as his mount crashed through their line.

But three lances and a sword left a cruel mark on Conan's mare. She screamed like a damned soul and had the strength to rear so violently that the Cimmerian lost his seat. He slid backward, landing spring-legged as his horse fell, blood flowing from her mouth as well as her wounds. His drawn sword hissed in a deadly arc before him and to either side, and the screams of Turanian horses drowned out the mare's death rattle.

Then the butt of a lance came down on his shoulder. It jarred even Conan's muscle-armored limb to the bone, and his sword turned in his hand as he slashed at the lance-bearer. The barbarian opened the man's chest, even through a coat of good Turanian mail, but Conan's sword stuck for a moment.

Another lance thrust forward, ripping across Conan's forearm. The shock, more than the pain or the damage, forced open his hand. His sword fell. Conan drew his dagger and leapt for the first horseman he could see—which left him open to three on his left and rear whom he could not.

All struck with lance-butts, and the darkness of the desert night poured into Conan's brain and swallowed up his being.

The young captain reined in just outside sword's reach from the circle of men around the fallen Afghuli leader. He did not doubt the obedience of his men, even though his orders had doubtless cost some their lives and more blood and pain. He did doubt that after such a fight in such darkness, all saw clearly.

"Who passes there?"

Good, it was Sergeant Barak. He was as hard to excite as a sand dune, and nearly as hard to move.

"The scarred captain." Why did he name himself so? The man on the ground might be the wrong one, and if he was the right one, he was still most likely as senseless as a prayer carpet.

No matter. It had been an impulse, of the sort the captain had learned to trust over many years. Trusting them was one of the things that had guarded his back from his enemies and his king alike—if in fact these were different.

"Make way for the captain," Barak called, pitching his voice to carry without raising it to his normal bull's roar. The captain dismounted as the circle of men opened, and stepped forward to see what lay on the ground within it.

It was the man the captain had been seeking. He was breathing and looked to be intact as to limb and vital organs. If this was so, even if the blood that covered him was partly his, he would heal swiftly and be fit to fight soon enough for the captain's plans. The best part of ten years had not taken much from the man's colossal vitality, unless all the tales of him that had reached the captain's ears were lies.

"How many of our comrades are dead?"

Muttered answers said little, until the sergeant called for silence and asked a few sharp questions.

"Nine, lord, and five more gravely hurt."

"I will reward the kin of all who died here tonight, and the living who are past service will likewise be free of want."

Whether shaken, respectful, or merely prudent when no one knew who spied where, the men were silent. None asked, "With what?" which would have been a more than reasonable question to anyone who did not know the captain's hidden resources.

Not even their being hidden could save a single brass piece, however, if

this plan miscarried. The captain disliked hiding even part of the truth, but he had to admit that this was no time to pour out all of it, like flinging the contents of a chamber pot from an attic window.

"How many men had he with him?" was the captain's next question.

"We slew or took seven," the sergeant said. "Most likely there was a handful more, from the horses. But they've run off the gods alone know where."

The sergeant, like the wise of his kind, knew how to tell an officer distasteful truths without putting them into words. The man's tone and, even in the darkness, his stance told him that the men would not readily charge off into the desert night, seeking the last Afghulis.

Nor was there any need for them to do so. Those who fled were of small concern. The captives, on the other hand—

"How many taken?"

"Two who will live, and one who will not see dawn."

"Cut his throat and say proper rites over him. Bind the others' wounds, likewise this one's, and prepare horse litters for them. We ride for the Virgin's Oasis when this is done."

Barak was not the only one to bow his head and say, "As you command, my lord." He also was not the only one whose face showed doubt as to the cause of this—if it had any cause but their captain's sudden madness!

## **Five**

Conan awoke in a tent. This was no surprise. Nor was it any surprise that his feet were chained to a stout stake driven into the ground in the middle of the tent. Wrist irons connected by another length of chain restrained his hands, but left him free to reach a jug of water and a plate of flat Turanian bread on the ground beside him.

The real surprise was his being awake and alive at all. The captain clearly had more than common control over his men, that they obeyed his orders to capture the Cimmerian alive after such a bloodbath as the final fight. Conan felt bruises, grazes, and one or two gashes, but none were more than he had expected, and all seemed to have been cleaned, poulticed, and even dressed.

Somebody—call him the captain—wanted Conan alive. For what purpose, the Cimmerian could only guess. He vowed to ask the first man

who came in, and if the answer was not to his liking—well, there was enough scope in the chains that he could strangle at least one man. And if he could break the chains, as he had broken chains at least as stout when he was younger and had nothing but bull-strength—a broken chain made a weapon wise men feared.

Conan sat up, thirst crackling in his mouth and throat and thunder rumbling in his head. Awkwardly, he lifted the jug and emptied it in a few swallows. He was reaching for the bread when he saw movement behind one flap of the tent door.

"Call this food!" he shouted. "Bring me some meat fit for a man, or send your captain and I'll devour him!"

The tent flap shook violently as the Cimmerian's wrath propelled the unseen listener out into the open, then fell still. Conan's laughter sent bread sliding off the plate. Then he was too busy making the bread disappear to care further about the fugitive.

The bread had been coarse when fresh and was now stale as well, but food meant strength for the next fight. There would be such a fight, too. Even had Conan been disposed to submit meekly to whatever death the Turanians intended for him, there were a dozen sworn comrades to properly avenge.

There were two death sentences in force in this Turanian camp this day. The first was that which the Turanians had passed on Conan. The second was the one that Conan had passed on the men who tried to carry out the first.

By the time he had taken that resolve, Conan had emptied the plate as well as the jug. He belched in satisfaction, then cautiously tested the strength of his chains.

The test pleased him. The chains were heavy enough, but the rivets holding them to the rings were another matter. Even on that first cautious test, Conan had sensed weakness there that pleased him—and also offended him.

His father would *never* have taken a king's silver for such shoddy work!

The captain had awakened from a dream of breaking his fast on perfumed wine, honey cakes, and fresh fruit, in a bed furnished with silk sheets and shared with a comely lady now some years dead.

His actual fast-breaker was water, bread, and a slab of sausage. He could not recognize what meat had gone into the sausage; after three bites

he decided he did not wish to know. Appetite, however, kept him eating until the sausage was down and settling, however uneasily, in his stomach.

He was trimming his mustache with his dagger when Sergeant Barak entered.

"The big prisoner is awake."

"How does he fare?"

"Healthy enough to curse the guards into fits, or so I've heard."

"A good sign. What of the others?"

"The Afghulis?"

"Is that what they are? A long way from home, I should say."

That bordered on lying. It was hardly a surprise that the man would have sworn Aghuli guards, if the tales from Afghulistan these two years past held even a kernel of truth.

It was also a near-lie in a good cause. The captain wished to know how many of his men might have some chance of recognizing the captive. The fewer, the better, at least until he and the man had sat down together and felt each other out.

"I am going to visit the captive. Have wine and sausage brought to the tent when I am there. Treat the Afghulis as common prisoners, but do not allow anyone to harm them or them to harm themselves."

"As the captain wills," Barak said. Again the captain knew he was being politely reproached.

"Are the men unhappy?"

"Not so's you'd notice, even the ones who lost friends. But they're all curious."

And unsatisfied curiosity could turn into discontent and mutiny faster than the desert wind could blow down an ill-secured tent. The captain had survived one such affray when he was barely fledged, and had no wish to face a second.

"I must speak with our captive to satisfy my own curiosity," the captain said. "But when I have satisfied mine, I will do the same for all the men."

The sergeant bowed. He seemed more resigned than happy, but that was the common view of sergeants toward superiors and superiors' plans they could not understand.

The captain finished trimming his mustache, cleaned his teeth, then

garbed himself properly, including mail under his tunic, both shirt and loin-guard, and a steel cap under his headdress. Of weapons openly displayed, he bore only a dagger.

If he could make his peace with the captive, he would need no weapon at all. If not, neither sword, axe, nor bow would be sufficient.

Conan had just decided that he was unobserved and that it was time to begin loosening rivets when the tent flap shivered. Then a Turanian captain walked in, wearing silk from headdress to boot-top and a jeweled dagger in his sash.

*Another of Yezdigerd's well-born lapdogs*, was the Cimmerian's first thought.

Then he noticed that the silk was heavy enough to wear well, and stained and patched from much hard service. The sash had the subtle bulges of one weighted to serve as a weapon, and the steel of the dagger probably cost as much as the jewels. Nor did the man move like a courtier, more like a young wolf for all that he was at least a head shorter than the Cimmerian.

"Well, Captain Conan. I will not now say well met, but I will ask if you remember me."

Conan knew the Turanian tongue well enough that he could have composed verse in it had he ever felt the desire to compose verse at all. The captain's accent was that of the very highest nobility—so wellborn, he was, if no lapdog.

The Cimmerian studied his visitor, whom he began to think he had indeed seen before. He thought the man had been thinner and the beard not so faded by years of desert sun, but above the beard—

"Crom!"

"Not I, Conan. I would not sit on a throne of ice in a cold wasteland, glowering at all men who dare ask me for the smallest favor. Or is that some other Cimmerian god?"

"That is close enough, Khezal son of Ahlbros. Or Khezal's twin brother, if ever he had such."

"There is only one and he stands before you."

"Well, sit, then. It will never be said that I made an old comrade stand in my presence, even when I'm not at my best for giving hospitality."

Something Conan could not readily name passed over Khezal's face at



the words "old comrade." So the man put some value on that, did he? Enough, maybe, to explain what he planned and what part the Cimmerian had in those plans?

Khezal sat down. He seemed to move a trifle more stiffly now.

"New wounds, Khezal? Or the old ones bothering you more with the passing years?"

"Conan, I'm three years younger than you, which hardly makes me a stiffening dotard drowsing by the fireside. Can you shape your tongue to questions that are neither impertinent nor insulting?"

If Conan had held any doubt of Khezal's identity, it was fast fading. The wry speech was that of the young captain, hardly more than a boy, who had fought beside Conan against the beasts created by the Jewels of Kurag. The best part of ten years had made the manner sit better on him, like a masterpiece of a saddle on a horse, but had not changed it past recognition.

"If this question is either, may Erlik's hounds bite off your stones. What of my men?"

"We have given rites to three, and hold two honorably captive. The others have fled."

"May I see them?"

"When we have—"

"Now."

"Conan, you are hardly in the best position to make conditions."

"On the contrary, I'm in a fine position. You want something from me. As long as I refuse it, you are worse off than I."

"Your position could be made worse."

"How, without risking my death? Dead men help no living man's schemes, as I'm sure I need not tell you."

Khezal muttered something that invoked unlawful parts of a number of still less lawful gods. Conan laughed.

"I'm not meaning to begin our new friendship with a quarrel. Not if there's to be a friendship, which I imagine there is, or I'd have awakened with my throat cut. But a quarrel, there'll be, if I can't see my men."

"Conan, by Erlik, Mitra, Vashti, and Crom, by the blood we have shed in each other's company, by Dessa's lively legs, and by Pylia's fine breasts, I swear that your men have come to no harm."

The Cimmerian laughed. "I can almost believe that oath. How fare the ladies?"

Khezal's face turned sober. "Pylia is dead. The story goes that she challenged some younger rival to see who could wear out the most men in a single night. She won, but died of her victory."

"Remembering Pylia, I can believe that. And Dessa?"

"She keeps her own tavern, after years as Pylia's most trusted girl. Still comely, the last time I saw her, and as we thought she might, thriving as she never would have wed to some dull clerk."

"A wench after my own heart—"

"And other parts? Never mind, you are right. We are neither of us made to be clerks, either."

"No, but I am made so that I will see those men of mine, whether you help or hinder."

"Conan, were I my own master—"

"The son of one of the Seventeen Attendants, not his own master? Tell me that shrimp sing bawdy ballads, and I will believe this more easily."

Khezal's face went taut and dark, and Conan instantly realized that he had struck too deep, even in jest. He had indeed heard much of the affairs of Turan since Yezdigerd ascended the throne, to make him believe that even a man like Khezal could fall from favor. After all, why otherwise would the man be prowling the desert with Turanian cavalry patrols, instead of governing a whole province?

"I ask your pardon, Khezal. I spoke too hastily. But those men are sworn to me, and I to them."

"I doubt it not. And I am sworn to defend Turan against all its enemies, among whom you are numbered. If I am to be forsworn, the fewer who know about it, the better for us all. Informers are always cheap, and there is more than enough silver to buy them. The less you are seen until after we march, the better."

Conan had also heard that Turan now swarmed with spies as an ill-kept kitchen with vermin. If Khezal risked more than his authority over his men— risked his own life, indeed—he deserved a hearing.

He also was a battle comrade, and it was not in Conan to forget the debt he owed to such.

"Let it be as you wish, Khezal. Tell me what you want of me, and I will trust you for what comes next."

"You almost said that without smiling, Conan."

"Did I? Perhaps I'd best become a player in temple pageants, to command my face better."

"I remember seeing you draw—what was his name? Kilar?—anyway, the one with the loaded dice—into cheating you before a half-score of witnesses. One would have taken you for a temple image, not a temple player!"

"I'll thank you more for the flattery when I've heard you out. Or do the tent walls have ears?"

Khezal shrugged, then sat down cross-legged and began to speak.

Khezal had more trouble than expected, finding words to make the situation in the Kezankian Mountains clear to the Cimmerian. It was not that he distrusted Conan's wits—nobody but a fool thought the Cimmerian an overmuscled oaf, and not a few of such fools had over the years died from their mistake.

It was that, put into plain Turanian words, the menace of the Valley of the Mists seemed an old peasant wife's tale, mumbled about the fire late at night to frighten the children and the young maids into staying close to home. Time after time, Khezal heard in his mind gusty Cimmerian laughter, and hesitated before adding some detail he knew to be the truth or at least had heard from someone he trusted.

In the end, it was the Cimmerian who reduced

Khezal's words to a few brisk statements. He leaned back, managing in spite of the chains to appear as relaxed as a cream-filled cat. (It was only when the Cimmerian was half-done that Khezal noticed there was play in the rivets linking chains to wrist and leg irons that had not been there last night.)

"Something in the Kezankian Mountains is sending out raiders to snatch villagers. The tale goes that they are taken to a place called the Valley of the Mists and there sacrificed to demons."

"Some name it the Mist of Doom—" Khezal began, but Conan held up a hand with such regal dignity that the listener forgot that the hands were chained and the man himself sat upon a rough pallet, not a throne.

"If we quibble over every small detail, spies will have time to ride from Aghrapur to skulk outside the tent. If we would sound each other out on this, best we do it quickly."

With that, Khezal could hardly disagree. The Cimmerian continued.

"The demon of the mist or whatever draws on old magic is strong in the Kezankians. Fear and grief make the villagers there uneasy, also the nomad tribes between the mountains and the Turanian border. Or does Yezdigerd now claim all the land for the Kezankians and even beyond?"

"Not openly, but those with an ear for the king's true thoughts say so."

Conan snorted like a balky horse. "Trust that to set the Khorajans' teeth on edge. They've learned to live in the shadow of Turan, they and the folk of Khauran. They'll mislike having Yezdigerd's garri-sons peering over their garden walls from the slopes of the mountains."

Khezal said nothing, as there was no reply he cared to make to plain truth plainly stated. Rumors had run that Conan was developing a taste for statecraft, or at least the art of reading kings' intentions. (Not unlikely, this last—any mercenary captain who wanted to stay alive past his first employment needed that art, though not all had it.)

"Is this whole tale of demons in the mountains perhaps put about by the Khorajans?" the Cimmerian insisted.

"Folk are vanishing, certainly," Khezal replied. "Those who fight the raiders too fiercely die by human weapons. The raiders at least are human, though none can say of what folk or race."

"Probably of every folk and race in the world, if I know the kind of mercenary who hires out for this sort of dirty work," Conan said. "But no matter. The question I put to you is, why does this concern you?"

"Because my family's estates lie hard against the mountains," Khezal said. "An inheritance from my mother, and not a great one even before half went to dower my sister. But the villagers and their lands are mine."

Conan snorted again. "From what you said, I doubted that you had any lands left."

"I can tell all the sorry tales some other time and place, Conan. Here I only say that stripping me of my lands would have raised tempers, even swords, against Yezdigerd. Sending me and my Greencloaks far afield while royal agents bribe my stewards to send the revenues to Aghrapur rather than to me— that is too subtle for anyone to notice."

Conan muttered something that no listening ears could have understood but that sounded to Khezal very much like a wish that King Yezdigerd would find his manhood failing him at an awkward moment. Then he shrugged.

"I don't doubt your loyalty to your folk. You always seemed like that sort. But what will the king say? Will he say you do a lord's duty, or will someone whisper in his ear that you seek to win your people over to rebellion?"

"You've grown longheaded with the years, Conan."

"Long or short, it's the only head I have, and of more use on my shoulders than on a spike outside some Turanian prison. Which is where it's likely to end up if Yezdigerd calls this whole matter a plot against him."

Khezal took a deep breath, then let it out. It had been on the tip of his tongue to question the Cimmerian's courage. But that would have been at one and the same time foolish, perilous, and without reason.

"If he learns about it before we're done, perhaps. If we winkle the secret out of the mountains soon enough, however—"

"I'll take my reward in a safe passage out of Turanian lands, at the very least."

"Then you'll ride with us?"

"For whatever good I can do, yes. I haven't fought nearly as many demons as the tales run, though. Remember that."

"Not as many demons, but I'd wager even more men, and here you are, and where are they? Names carved on family tombs, if that much."

"Perhaps," Conan said. "I can't bind my men, however. They didn't swear to follow me against demons. If they wish to leave, they have a safe conduct good from this day forth."

Khezal did not need to ask what the price of his refusal would be. But he had to make one more effort, for the honor of his own men whose blood the Afghulis had shed.

"If they ride with you, I return—a certain bag— that was taken from you."

"With what was in it?"

Khezal smiled thinly. Perhaps the Cimmerian could be bought after all.

"Of course."

Conan sat up, so abruptly that Khezal drew back a pace. It was as well that he did. The Cimmerian flung his massive arms apart, the chain snapped free of one wrist iron, and another cat-quick movement sent the end of the chain whipping through the space Khezal had just departed.

Khezal's hand went as far as the hilt of his dagger before his wits regained command of the member.

"I think you have made your point," he said, after he had also regained command of his voice. "So I will not draw mine. One condition: I bring your men to you, unless you wish to wait for night."

"I suppose no one will suspect plots over a couple of Afghuli captives," Conan said. "As you wish. But bring some decent food for all of us when you do."

"You have had the best there is in the camp."

"What? No private stores for feasting in your tent?"

"None."

"I think I believe you, friend. Very well. More food, then, if not better. And the best doctor for their wounds, if he has not already seen them."

"He has, but he can come again."

"See that he does," the Cimmerian said. His tone was such that Khezal felt an absurd wish to make the formal bow due to a governor or leader of a host.

Instead he rose and walked out, erect but not turning his back on the Cimmerian.

## Six

After winning the temporary allegiance of Conan, Khezal's dearest wish was to be gone on the quest for the Valley of the Mists as soon as possible. He would gladly have ridden out that very night, with his hundred best Greencloaks.

Indeed, he would have mortgaged a small estate, or even a large one, to pay a friendly wizard to turn all his men's cloaks into wings, that they might fly on the wind to the Kezankian Mountains. Thus might they outspeed the tales of their coming, surprising the demons and their human servants. Thus might they also settle the matter of the mountains' demons before word of Conan's presence reached unfriendly ears in Aghrapur.

However, Khezal was of much the same mind as Conan—the words "friendly" and "wizard" did not belong in the same sentence. Both would also have doubted that even a wizard who professed friendship would keep a bargain, rather than taking his gold and fleeing at once for the land of

the Hyperboreans.

In any case, the lack of magical assistance for the journey north was only the first and least of Khezal's frustrations. The next was Conan's insistence on waiting until the two Afghulis who were riding north were fit to travel.

"Do you doubt my word, that they will be safe here among the Greencloak garrison of the Virgin's Oasis?" Khezal asked, laughing to cover his fury.

Conan, wholly sober, shook his head. "I doubt not your word, not even your command over your men as long as your eye is on them. But your eye will be on the slopes of the Kezankians, and your men here. That's another matter, and the name for the matter would be 'blood feud' if anything happened to the Afghulis."

Khezal considered this. Neither he nor any Turanian had much love for the Afghulis, but they were not among the realm's leading foes. The Iranistanis were otherwise—and the Afghulis were even less friendly to Iranistan than to Turan. There would hardly be gratitude toward a man who made blood foes of Turan among the Afghulis.

More important than any lack of gratitude in court circles would be the enmity of proven captains in war. Khezal would have endangered *their* men, and imperiled their victories. Lack of gratitude among courtiers, Khezal could endure. Knives in the dark, wielded on the orders of men whom he had trusted to guard his back from Yezdigerd, would make life singularly futile for the short time it might last.

"As you wish. I trust that your friends are as hardy as the tale-tellers have them, though. We do not want one of my enemies ambushing us with half a regiment as we cross the caravan route, because a spy has told a tale in the palace!"

"Khezal, I am no more a lover of palaces and what goes on in them than you are. Trust me for that, and my Afghulis for swift healing."

To Khezal's relief, the Afghulis were standing within a day and riding within two. They moved stiffly at first, but that they were fighting-fit was proved on the third day.

A groom boy, so green that he had hardly wiped his mother's milk from his lips, grew curious about Farad's dagger. He reached out to touch it—and found himself on his back some paces away, lip split and several teeth scattered about on the sand.

"The lad should call himself lucky," was all Khezal could get out of

Conan. "And you should call your chief groom a fool, for letting into the field a witling who'll touch another's steel without asking."

"That won't heal the boy."

Conan shrugged, then dipped into his belt pouch. An Iranistani silver prince-piece came out. The Cimmerian tossed it high, then slapped it out of the air with one hand, into the palm of another.

"Here. Even a fool deserves a trifle of poppy syrup to soothe his hurts."

"Perhaps I should hold on to those jewels after all. We may need them to silence the angry and heal the hurt, if we have many more of these exchanges."

"At your pleasure, my friend. But I will talk to Farad and Sorbim, if you will talk to your people."

"I will, and pray to Mitra that all listen!"

"Halt! Who seeks to pass?"

Captain Muhbaras's mind had lurched up out of sleep before his body was ready to follow. That sentry had to be one of the new recruits, a "settled" nomad. How settled any of the tribesmen could become was a matter of some debate. It was evident that he had not learned sentry drill as thoroughly as could be wished.

The reply came in a woman's voice, which finished the work of awakening the captain's body. He could make out no words, but there was no need for that. The only women out and about here by night were the Maidens of the Mist, and the most likely reason they would be here was something either dire, urgent, or both.

Across the single room in the hut, blankets roiled and heaved like water in a millrace. A round face with a crinkly black chin beard rose above the blankets, like an otter surfacing from a dive.

"A woman?" the face said. The mouth was a thin gash, unwholesomely out of proportion to the rest of the face. It always seemed a marvel to the captain that Ermik's tongue was not forked, like that of a serpent.

"A Maiden."

"Ah. No doubt seeking to end that—"

In a moment the captain was out of his blankets and off his pallet. In another moment he had taken two strides and was standing over the other. His hand was on the hilt of his sword. His gaze was fixed on the wall



of the hut.

If he allowed his gaze to drift downward, he knew he might draw the sword and thrust it into the thick neck below the round face. That would silence the greasy voice, but raise a howling and a shrieking back in Khoraja that would not end until he himself was dead, and likely many of his men dead with him. Men he had sworn to lead out of these Hell-cursed mountains, as he had sworn to lead them in.

"You may think that, if you wish, and risk both body and soul if the Lady of the Mist hears your thoughts. Do not ever let them pass your lips. Not where a Maiden can hear them. Not where I can hear them. Not where a hawk, a mouse, or a beetle can hear them!

"Do you understand?"

The small dark eyes above the blankets resembled a pig's eyes, but they were as unblinking as a serpent's.

"Do you?" the captain repeated.

"I do."

"Then hold your tongue and go back to sleep."

"I must visit the—"

"After I am done with the Maiden."

The other's mouth opened again, and the captain's hand tightened on the age-darkened leather of the sword's grip. Even one bawdy *word* from the other might send him over the brink—and perhaps he could buy his life and his men's by saying that the Maidens would have slain Ermik, the Grand Council's spy, had the captain not done so.

The Maidens—or their mistress. It would sound dreadful enough to persuade the Council.

Indeed, it might even be the truth.

"Do not be long."

The other could foul his blankets for all that the captain cared, save that the hut reeked enough as it was.

"I shall be no longer than the Maiden detains me. How long that will be depends on her errand, and I offer you another piece of wisdom."

"Will you have any wisdom left if you keep offering me pieces of it?"

The captain ignored the pert reply as he would have the yelping of a cur in the streets. "The shorter the time I am gone, the worse the news the

Maiden bears."

That opened Ermik's eyes agreeably wide. They stared after the captain as he strode out into the night.

Conan was seated cross-legged on a carpet in the Afghulis' tent, watching the surgeon's Vendhyan slave tend Farad's wounds. Before him on the rug stood a jug of wine. A small bribe had procured it from the surgeon's stores, and after a cup of it, Conan felt a trifle more reconciled to the world as it was.

The slave jerked a dressing from Farad's ribs, taking a scab with it. Blood trickled, Farad glared, the slave cringed and muttered something under his breath. It was probably not a curse, although, like most Vendhyans, the slave could hardly be overly fond of Afghulis. Centuries of border raids, burned villages, and looted caravans had seen to that.

However, Conan understood several of the Ven-dhyan dialects, and the first time the slave ill-wished the Afghulis, he said as much. He added that if the slave could not keep his tongue between his teeth by the power of his will, either his tongue or his teeth might be removed, or perhaps his lips sewn shut. Mutes were not always the best slaves, but if muting them improved their manners—

The slave could hardly have abased himself more, or more swiftly promised good behavior in the future.

The Vendhyan was quickly but deftly putting a fresh dressing on Farad's battered ribs when tramping feet thudded outside the tent. Before anyone could give warning, Captain Khezal pushed his way into the tent.

Neither his sudden coming nor the look on his face made Khezal seem the bearer of good news. When with one look he sent the slave fleeing as if scorpions were nesting in his breeches, he made Conan certain of this.

He did not even venture to guess what the bad news might be; Khezal's scheme was one likely to go awry at half a dozen points before they even sighted the peaks of the Kezankians. Nor was the Cimmerian's knowledge of Turan's intrigues or the nomads' feuds what it had been. The bad news might be something altogether unconnected with the quest for the Valley of the Mists.

At least Conan thought he could trust Khezal to tell him all of the truth that any man not of Turan could be trusted to know. That was more than could be said of more than a few leaders Conan had followed.

"We have found the remaining Afghulis," Khezal said.

"Rejoice," Farad replied. Conan trusted that Khezal did not hear the ironic note in the Afghuli's voice.

"Or rather, they have found those who sought them," Khezal went on. "They laid an ambush even more cunning than I had expected from such skilled warriors."

"Flattery may raise hearts," Conan said. "It also uses time, of which I suspect we have but little, unless there is no more to your tale."

"Forgive me, Conan. I forgot that you were never a courtier."

"Improve your memory, then, my friend. Nor will I become a courtier soon enough to let you babble to no purpose."

Khezal took a deep breath. "It is to some purpose to know that the Afghulis who fled are unharmed. They unhorsed a half-score Greencloaks and took three as hostages to a cave. They have threatened the hostages with gelding and other harsh fates if Conan and any living Afghulis in Turanian hands are not freed at once."

Farad saved Conan the trouble of a swift reply by bursting into laughter that could doubtless be heard all over the camp. Khezal's face colored, and he looked at the ceiling of the tent, as if he wished the sky would fall on the Afghulis or him or both, to end this shameful moment.

At last both Farad and Khezal gained command of themselves, and into the silence Conan thrust a few words. "Then we must ride out at once, to prove that we are alive and free before they begin working on your men."

"What if I refuse to let you go?" Khezal asked. His eyes searched Conan's face, rather as if he were judging the temper of a horse he wished to buy. "This could be a scheme to escape. The nomads would doubtless pay you much for your knowledge of our camp."

"The nomads would pay us in slit throats after torturing the knowledge out of us, unless we contrived to die fighting them," Conan snapped. "Do not waste time or breath by testing me, Khezal. Not if you wish to keep your men whole."

"One must admit that there are fewer posts for eunuchs than there once were," Khezal said. He might almost have been meditating. Conan had to respect the inward courage that let the captain command himself in matters like this.

"So I will trust you and your Afghuli comrades to make no attempt to escape," the captain continued. "And I will also trust you to contrive the return of my men, whole and fit to fight. Otherwise we have no agreement, and I will look under every rock and grain of sand in this desert to find

you."

Conan knew when a man accustomed to commanding his temper was about to lose it. He made no protest at Khezal's terms, but began gathering his weapons and harness.

Captain Muhbaras's notion that he would hear bad news swiftly did not last long. He began to wish he had used some more prudent words to silence the spy. As it was, the man would either suspect a lie or fret himself into folly well before the captain returned.

There was, however, not one thing under the gods' sky that the captain could do about this problem, without paying the mortal price of offending the Lady of the Mists.

Nor would giving such offense please the spy. He had made it plainer than a fruit-seller in the bazaar crying his wares; his purpose here was to speed the work of the alliance with the Lady of the Mists to the peril of Turan and the profit of Khoraja.

It was therefore just barely possible that the spy needed the captain more than the captain needed him. The captain resolved to remember that as he followed his escort of Maidens into the valley.

Escort or guard? One walked ahead, and one on either side save where the path was too narrow for more than one pair of feet. Then the flankers stepped forward to join the leader.

No less than four Maidens walked behind the captain. He turned twice to stare at them, and each time their leader gave him a look that would have frozen the manhood of a god. The others lightly brushed their hands to the hilts of their swords.

After that the captain was entirely certain that he was going either to his own death or to something that he would doubtless protest almost as violently. It was some small consolation to know that the Lady thought she might need steel as well as spells to ward him off. Entering the Valley of the Mists, the captain did not feel nearly that formidable.

He felt still less so as they passed within the cleft, through the two great gates, and on to a trail that climbed the cliff to the left of the entrance. The trail was wide enough for two abreast, but it climbed so steeply that in places the rock was shaped into steps. In the twilight, and taking care not to stumble, the captain could not be sure what shapes were carved into those steps. He doubted that the knowledge was either necessary or wholesome.

In the twilight, the valley itself did nothing to ease a man's mind. Two walls of mountain stretched away into shadows whose blue and purple hues seemed against nature. Overhead the stars were coming out with a savage brightness, even as the last light drained from the western sky. Mist gathered here, there, and everywhere, according to no pattern the captain recognized, gray tendrils rising to dance and swirl with the sinuosity of living beings.

The captain had the sense of entering a vast temple, so long ruined that it was roofless and naked to the stars, but whose walls and altars of sacrifice were yet intact. Intact, and bound by great and dreadful magic to remain that way until some nameless purpose was fulfilled.

He shivered from more than the chill of the night air, and was glad when the trail turned into a cave and the cave into a tunnel carved from the wall of the valley. Torches lit the party's way, and twice they surprised the misshapen half-human slaves of the valley tending to the lights.

Again the captain rejoiced that the light was too dim to let him see every unwholesome detail of the half-men. Or women—he was sure that one of them was a woman, barely past girlhood, and he fought back the urge to spew or perform rites of aversion.

Neither was acceptable to the Lady.

Muhbaras's modest pleasure lasted only until his guards led him into a small, almost intimate chamber. Its rock walls hid behind tapestries woven with archaic figures of dragons and giant birds, and a brazier glowing in the middle of it further warmed the air beyond what the captain had expected.

There was, however, no warmth in the Lady's face as she sat in her habitual cross-legged position on a silk cushion, the cushion in turn elevated on a stool carved from a single piece of Vendhyan teak. To show that he was not afraid, the captain sought to make out the figures carved in the stool, but ended being more unsettled than before as he failed to make sense of the carvings.

They were animals, birds, and things that had the shape of men but also subtle differences. They were nothing as simple as the Serpent Men of Valusia, who would have been almost a relief.

Muhbaras knew that custom required him to wait for the Lady to speak, as if she were a queen or near-kin to one. He also knew that this custom allowed the Lady to sit and study those who came before her for as long as it pleased her, rather like a serpent studying a particularly succulent bird.

By sheer force of will, Muhbaras had not grown uneasy and was standing as still as the seven Maidens when the Lady at last spoke.

"One of your warriors has looked upon a Maiden with the desire of a man for a woman."

The captain inclined his head, as graciously as he could contrive. Unless the Lady was altogether a raving madwoman, there had to be more to the matter. And as *he* was not a raving madman, he would let her reveal that "more" before he opened his own mouth.

It seemed that half the night crawled by, in a silence rivaling that of the graveyard. The captain began to suspect that the Lady was testing his courage, and vowed to pass any test she might set him.

At last the Lady sighed. She was garbed in a robe made of a single thickness of silk, so thin that Muhbaras could see her breasts lift under it with the sigh. He cast his eyes and thoughts elsewhere, and inclined his head again.

"Do you not wish to know more, Khorajan?" the Lady asked. Her voice had the quality of a fine steel blade slicing equally fine silk. In another it might have seemed intended to arouse desire. In the Lady it seemed only intended to arouse slavish obedience.

"I wish to know all that my Lady of the Mists sees fit to tell me. I do venture to add that the more she tells me, the more likely we are to resolve this matter peaceably."

"Peace requires the death of the soldier who offended. Anything less will mean no peace."

The captain waited, until he realized that he was expected to reply to those bald words, as naked of mercy as the rocks of the mountains or the vultures circling above them. Common sense told him that negotiation was futile. Honor bound him to try.

"A lesser penalty will still suffice to keep the man—"

"No lesser penalty will suffice in any way, in the eyes of the gods."

*Which gods?* the captain wondered, not quite reverently. Although the Lady might be unwilling or unable to answer, having confused her own will with that of the gods—a vice not unknown among less powerful mortals, or the captain would not have been here in honorable if perilous exile from his native city.

"Honor to the gods and to you, my Lady," the captain said. "But if no deed of desire has been done—"

"The eyes give passage to the soul. Your soldier's soul has touched the Maiden."

Muhbaras had not heard that from any priest, but had long since ceased to expect the Lady to be bound by any common notions of priestcraft. He would have liked to know what did bind her, and still hoped to learn something of that, but did not expect that this night would be the time.

The Lady's wrath in the face of disobedience would doubtless be tempered by her need for himself and his men. Yet even her tempered wrath could leave him unfit for duty for some time, which Ermik could put to use to usurp the captain's authority.

Moreover, the Lady (who was seldom ill informed) might know of the spy's coming and his favor in Khoraja. She might think that he could be put into the captain's place as a more pliant tool.

That would be folly in the Lady. But the captain had never heard that witches were less foolish than common folk.

"Give me the name of the man, then, and I will have him straitly confined, questioned, and brought before you."

"His name is Danar son of Araubas, and he has already been confined by my Maidens and their servants. His guilt is proven beyond need for further questioning. I summoned you here out of courtesy, that you might not wonder what had become of him. I only ask you: Do you wish to witness his passing or not?"

The moment the captain heard the name of the condemned man, he knew at least some truth without needing to ask questions the Lady would not answer. Danar was youthful, courteous, and by all reports, most pleasing to a woman's eye. If he had looked with desire on any woman, Maiden, crone, or a very goddess, it was because she had so looked upon him first!

That truth would not save Danar, however. It would most likely condemn the Maiden as well as Danar—and whatever hope the Maidens' womanliness might give to the captain would be flung off the cliff along with Danar.

That would be the method of execution—that or some other passing fit for a soldier. No more blackened and reeking tongues dealing a death that even the most hardened Stygian torturer would call harsh. The captain would save his man's soul, if he could not save his body.

"Very well. I will consent to all that you have asked, on one condition. I

will speak alone with Danar son of Araubas, and bear any last wishes to his kin. Otherwise I will make no promises whatever in this matter."

Muhbaras ventured to look the Lady squarely in the eyes. He saw for the first time flecks of brown in their blazing gold, and faint shadows on the eyelids below the finely plucked eyebrows.

In another woman, he would have said those eyes would look very well widening on a pillow as she gave and took pleasure. With the Lady of the Mists, that was a thought to drive from one's mind as one drove a mad dog from the nursery.

"By my honor and my bond with the Mists, I pledge to grant you that, if the man be living when you come to him."

That left an opening for treachery through which one could have driven the elephants of the royal menagerie, but Muhbaras judged it wise to make no further argument. He bowed his head and made the ritual Khorajan gestures of binding himself with blood and steel to fulfill a vow.

Then he straightened. "The man is more likely to be living if I go straight to him. Is that permitted?"

The Lady nodded. Silently she raised a hand, and the Maidens gathered about the captain to lead him out of the chamber.

Conan rode north in the vanguard of fifty Green-cloaks. Farad and Sorbim rode beside him, their gazes making a complete circle around their chief every few moments.

Ten paces to the Cimmerian's right, Khezal rode with three picked Greencloaks. They kept a similar watch out for his safety.

"Conan," Khezal called, across the gap. "What would you have done if I had refused to let you ride north?"

"I remember a wise captain who said that 'if is a word for priests and scribes, not fighting men."

"I remember that when the wise captain said that, he was teaching a young Cimmerian who has since become a wise captain in his own right."

"Indeed, I would have owed the other captain an answer to such a question," the Cimmerian said, in a dangerously level voice. "Do I owe you as much?"

"He taught me also, and there is another reason for you to think carefully before you refuse. I do not teach. I lead men, who, like me, must know how far we can trust you."



Conan muttered a few oaths, but within he was rallying his thoughts. Indeed, Khezal was in a position wherein the trust of his men was life or death. Anything that could help strengthen that trust, and would not weaken Conan, was Khezal's right.

"So be it," Conan said. "Had you refused, I would still have gone north, with Farad and Sorbim. No Greencloak would have suffered, save those foolish enough to stand in our path. We might even have saved the captives."

"And if you could not?" one Greencloak said. Khezal shot the man a barbed look, but Conan held up a hand.

"No, the answer's his right as well as yours. If they had to die, they would have died as whole men, or at least not without rites."

The Greencloak looked more content than his captain. Conan spat into the sand. Khezal was wiser than the Cimmerian intended to tell him for some while, but there was much he needed to learn about Afghulis and those the tribesmen called chief.

## **Seven**

Conan rode well to the fore, flanked by Farad and Sorbim. They were careful to keep their distance from the Greencloaks, without moving out of bowshot. That would smell of an attempt to escape, and no goodwill that Khezal bore the Cimmerian would stay the captain's command to his archers to shoot.

There also might be other men of warlike disposition roaming this patch of desert, besides Turanians and Afghulis. Among them, the three riders left no part of the horizon unwatched, nor the ranks of Turanian riders behind them.

Khezal had said the place where peacemaking was direly needed might be two hours away at a fast pace, as much as three at one that spared the horses. Conan stood silent as to which pace they should use, but gave the world a dusty grin as he saw the Turanians settle down to a pace that their mounts could keep up all day.

This was much as he had expected, Khezal being no fool. However, even wise men had been known to hasten unwisely, if they thought this would show loyalty and help keep their heads on their shoulders.

Conan had no quarrel with any such desire in Khezal. He only insisted that Khezal's head not survive at the price of his and his Afghulis'.

Everyone's head remained not only on his shoulders but clear and alert during that first hour. They were riding out from a well-supplied, well-watered camp, and even the newest to the ranks of the Greencloaks was a veteran of at least five years' service.

Watching the ranks of desert-wise riders behind him and remembering their gallant fight at the rocks, Conan felt a twinge of regret at his flight from Turanian service. The officer whose mistress he had "stolen" (a word he always resented, considering how willingly the lady had come to him) had been a friend of then-Prince Yezdigerd. Even if others had been able to patch up a truce between Conan and the officer, the lady would surely have suffered. The truce would also have ended the moment Yezdigerd felt himself secure enough on the throne to do such minor favors for his friends as handing them a Cimmerian's head...

No, it was as well to be out of Turanian service. It would have been better to be out of Turanian reach altogether, but Conan had small choice if he was to do his duty by the Afghulis who had exiled themselves out of loyalty to him. He could trust Khezal for everything the nobleman could control, and as for the rest, the Cimmerian trusted to his sword arm and steel—which had kept him above ground for a good many years and had not grown slack or dull in Afghulistan.

They were halfway through the second hour of their journey when Conan saw the horseman on a distant ridge to the north.

Danar son of Araubas looked rather better than his captain had expected when the two Khorajans met in the low rocky chamber where the younger man was confined awaiting execution. A second look told Muhbaras that the walls had once been bricked, more centuries ago than he cared to think about.

What he faced now was quite sufficiently disagreeable—and as nothing compared to what Danar might face if his luck were out.

Four Maidens had escorted the captain to the entrance of the chamber, so low that he had to stoop to enter—and he was not tall for a Khorajan. Four other Maidens were already on guard, which seemed none too few when the captain saw that the door itself was only a woven screen of rushes. A child with a toy dagger could have cut his way through that to a brief freedom, before the guards cut him down.

But none of the Maidens approached it, and on the floor the captain saw a dead mouse and more than a few dead insects. When a Maiden did open the screen, she did it with the bronze point of a spear whose shaft

was carved into unpleasantly familiar if still incomprehensible runes. She also wore an amulet of feathers and small rose- and amethyst-hued stone beads, and moved as cautiously as if the floor might open up and swallow her at a misstep.

The captain had seldom moved with such exquisite care as when he stooped and entered Danar's chamber. He would have gone down on his hands and knees to avoid touching the screen if it had been necessary.

To his mild surprise, the Maiden with the spear raised the screen high enough to spare him that humiliation. He said his thanks to her in his heart, knowing that even if she would keep the secret, her comrades would not. The Lady of the Mists kept her Maidens, if not at one another's throats, at least looking over one another's shoulders.

Doubtless the Lady knew that this could do harm in a battle against a serious foe. Comrades who had to fear one another's tongues as much as they did the enemy's steel could hardly be called comrades at all.

Just as certainly, the Lady was more concerned about keeping the Maidens loyal to her. A serious foe, she no doubt thought, would not enter the Valley of the Mists before her work was done.

It was no pleasure to Muhbaras to realize that the Lady of the Mists was quite probably right.

Even Conan's hawk-keen sight could make out little about the rider, other than that he rode a horse and wore dark robes.

"Which is the garb of half the tribes in this land," Khezal said when he rode up to move level with the Cimmerian. Otherwise they made no change of pace or formation, so that from a distance the watcher might think they had not seen him.

"Yes, and no doubt the garb of the other half when they go long enough without washing," Farad said.

"Speak for yourself, rock-crawler," Sergeant Barak muttered, before a glare from both Conan and Khezal silenced their followers.

The watcher seemed to have chosen a good post, overlooking the easiest march route but not actually on it. As they drew closer, the watcher drew back, and Conan saw that he was retreating toward a nightmarish tangle of ravines and rocks. A band half again the size of the Turanians could hide in that land, and seeking one man in it would take the rest of the day before they had to admit failure.

A few hundred paces farther on, the ground before the Turanians also grew rough. They could slow to a trot that made for easy conversation without revealing anything to the watcher.

The conversation was brief.

"The tribes could not have sent too many men into this area," Khezal said. "Otherwise the patrol's messenger could not have returned to camp to warn us."

"Unless they let the messenger through with the purpose of drawing us out into an ambush," Conan added.

"We have still done more than before, in keeping the large bands to the south and west," Khezal insisted. "One doubts that our number of Greencloaks has much to fear from any number of tribesmen who may lie ahead."

It would be unwise to dispute with Khezal before his own men, and Conan had little wish to do so. The Turanian captain might even be right. Still...

"Far be it from me to speak against your men," the

Cimmerian said. "But what of your men and my Afghulis? I wager that the tribesmen consider all alike lawful prey. If the tribesman have surrounded them since last night—"

"You see clearly. Yet only a large tribal band could maintain such a siege and still mount an ambush against us."

Conan had paid with his own blood and seen comrades pay with theirs for a captain's saying that "the enemy could not do so-and-so." Prophecy was a matter for sorcerers and the less honest sort of priest (which to the Cimmerian's mind was most of the breed).

Once again, the Cimmerian would not undermine Khezal's authority or flaunt his doubts of the prowess of the hosts of Turan (which, if half the tales he had heard were true, had indeed notably increased under Yezdigerd the Ambitious). This left him with few choices.

"I think we still need to fear an ambush. Is there another route to our destination, besides the shortest one? You know this land better than I."

"Indeed, and most of my men, better than I. There is such a way, longer and rougher."

"Does it offer more or less to ambushers?"

"Less, if my memory serves."

"It had better still serve for more than remembering which wench is willing, my friend. I suggest that you send six of your Greencloaks with me and my Afghulis, and we ride the main route. Those waiting will have to strike at us, or let us strike their comrades from the rear. Meanwhile, you take the rest of your men by the longer route."

Khezal looked at his men and then at the desert ahead. He nodded.

"I dislike the danger to you, but it's no worse than you have survived. Just bring my Greencloaks back safe, or at least give proof of their honorable passing."

"If they pass any other way, I shall go with them," Conan said.

"Do not be too eager to go where there is neither wine, women, nor good battles," Khezal said with a grin. "We shall never be able to properly celebrate our victories on this quest, I fear. I still do not wish to turn down cups to absent comrades!"

"How fare you, Captain?" Danar asked, when the dim oil lamp allowed him to recognize his superior.

Muhbaras started. He had expected Danar to be physically and mentally a ruin, already halfway to death. He had *not* expected the young soldier to be concerned about his captain's health!

The younger man grinned. "I have not been mistreated, save for eating bread that is mostly husks and shells. I think it is what they feed to those half-men in the fields."

"No doubt," the captain said. He gazed at the walls and the ensorcelled rush screen with what he hoped was an eloquent glance.

Danar shrugged. "I know the walls have ears and probably eyes. If you have any last gift for me, it is that you do not think me a fool."

Muhbaras assured Danar that he thought no such thing. He wished he could assure himself that there was some way of giving Danar a lawful or even easy death, and that he could communicate it to the man. Without some preparation, it would be hard to do anything swiftly enough to avoid the notice and wrath of the Lady of the Mists.

The captain knew he could not face that peril. He did not care what happened to him, save that his death would doubtless put Ermik in command of the mission to the valley. Then every sort of dire fate would loom over the men.

It was possible that Danar might have to face a hard death, for the sake

of his comrades. How to tell him that, and how to sleep at night after it happened?

*I grow too old for intrigues, Muhbaras decided. Give me a last battle against a worthy foe, and I will not care if I survive it.*

"Do you know if the Lady seeks your—'life essence' or whatever they call it in their priest-talk?" the captain asked.

Danar shrugged again. "Perhaps, hence the good treatment. Perhaps not, also, if they think it has been corrupted by unlawful lust."

"Knowing that a woman like one of the Maidens is fair is *never* unlawful," Muhbaras snapped. "Only a blind man could avoid doing so, and I am sure the Lady does not wish to be served by blind men or eunuchs."

It was Danar's turn to look meaningfully at the walls. "No," he said, but he did not meet the captain's eyes. Also, there was something in his voice, even in that single word...

*I will not even think the question, "Did anything happen between you and the Maiden, more than glances?"*

Wrapped in a kerchief in his belt pouch, Muhbaras had a small bronze knife, suitable to rest under a lady's pillow but capable of letting out life if applied in the right place. Now he pulled out the kerchief and bent over Danar, seemingly to wipe sweat or perhaps dew from the soldier's forehead.

Before he could touch Danar, the younger man's hand seemed to float up and grip the captain's wrist. It was a grip that would have looked gentle from a few paces away, but was actually as unbreakable as an iron shackle without more effort than the captain cared to make.

With his mouth only a hand's breadth from his captain's ear, Danar whispered, "Guard yourself for my comrades, and do not worry about me. I have other friends."

The words left as much mystery behind as ever, but the tone was that of a man walking to meet his fate with firm step and open eyes.

*May I do as well as Danar, if my time comes while I am within reach of the Lady of the Mists.*

After that there was nothing to say but formal words that would make easy hearing for listening ears, a final grip of forearms, and the captain's departure. He even deferred his prayers of thanks to Mitra until he was not only outside the chamber but out of sight and hearing of the Maidens

on guard.

Even farther along the path, he wondered if the madness was spreading. And if so, was this the Lady's ultimate prize—or did she have something still worse in hand for the Valley of the Mists and all within it?

Khezal added one stratagem to the plan he and Conan had conceived. He detached a dozen or so Greencloaks to remain behind both of the other bands, to ride in circles and raise a prodigious cloud of dust.

"Even the most desert-wise tribesman will think that the more dust, the more men," Khezal said. "More unfriendly eyes will be on them, fewer on the rest of us as we slip off about our lawful occasions."

Conan made a Cimmerian gesture of aversion. Khezal nodded. "That is not all they will do, either. Once they have thrown dust in our enemies' eyes, they will follow us by yet a third route. Slowest of all, it will still let them come to the aid of either of the other bands. They may even be able to slip behind an ambush and turn it against those who laid it."

Conan grinned, and this time made an Afghuli gesture for hailing an honored chief. There was not much he could teach Khezal about arraying men for battle, and he would waste no more time trying.

Instead he signaled to his men, as one of Khezal's sergeants rode out with the dozen dust-raisers. The two Afghulis cantered up and drew rein, the Green-cloaks assembled under the watchful eye of Sergeant Barak and their captain, and the dust rose high.

It also rose thick, thanks to the dropping of the wind. Thus Conan led his men off down the dry wash that opened their chosen route with little fear of unfriendly eyes counting them, let alone seeing them. He still kept his eyes searching the rocks and ridges to the left, while Farad searched to the right, and Sobrim studied their Greencloak comrades.

Conan did not think that cold-blooded treachery was in the Greencloaks. But no discipline could keep from a soldier's mind the thought of avenging a comrade or kin, and men with such losses might well be riding at Conan's back. It was a circumstance he had survived more than a few times, but only by taking nothing for granted.

Then the dry wash gave on a real valley, with rocky slopes rising, it seemed, halfway to the sky on either side. The floor of the valley was level, fit for quick movement if one cared little for the endurance of one's horses.

Conan held the pace to a trot while he studied the slopes. The rocks could hide a small army of ambushers, but there were broad stretches of

ground where a dog could not hide and a surefooted horse could descend at a good pace.

So far, Khezal had not sent them into any place where aid could not reach them—if aid were sent.

Farad seemed to read the Cimmerian's thoughts.

"So far, that Khezal lad seems well enough to obey."

"The 'lad' is only a trifle younger than you are, Farad."

"In years only, or in battles?"

"Talk to him sometime, when our comradeship is a trifle farther along—"

"I will be too old to do more than croak like a marsh frog if I wait that long."

"Did anyone ever tell you that interrupting your captain is ill done?"

"You are my chief, not my captain. The ways of lowland armies, fit only to fight women, are not for the Afghulis."

"The way of Cimmerians with those whose tongues wag to no purpose is to knock them about the head until the tongues are still."

Farad and Sorbim exchanged glances, and Conan could see them reaching the conclusion that their "chief was not speaking entirely in jest. Farad muttered something that Conan chose to take as an apology, and they rode on in silence.

## **Eight**

In the outer world (which now seemed to Captain Muhbaras a distant memory, except as a place to seek captives for the Lady's sacrifices) it would still be full daylight. But the sun was already behind the walls of the Valley of the Mists, and purple shadows were swallowing the valley floor.

They were also creeping up the walls. The captain hoped this business would be done before they reached the cave mouth where he stood, watched or perhaps guarded by eight of the Maidens. He supposed it was an honor that he was considered so worthy of either respect or fear that he had so many Maidens assigned entirely to him.

He knew it was an honor he would cease to appreciate if he was not on his way back to his quarters before darkness filled the valley. He had never been so far into the valley this late in the day, but apparently there was



some mystical reason (or at least excuse) for putting an end to Danar's life at this particular time.

There was nothing in sight in the valley that Muhbaras had not seen before. Nor did he care to look at the Maidens. With his graying hair and display of scars, he might be considered too old to be looking at them with lust. With his weapons he might be suspected of planning to rescue his man, which could bring an even swifter and hardly less dire fate.

Having decided, reluctantly, not to sacrifice his life to speed the ending of Danar's, the captain refused to contemplate perishing as a result of a mistake (although that was the fate of most soldiers, even if the mistake might be a healer's instead of a captain's).

He could still study the Maidens as a visitor might study the guards of a prince's palace, judging their fitness for battle and other matters of interest to soldiers. If the Lady argued *that* point, he would have to discuss with her certain things that his duties to her required, however much she might despise soldiers, men, outsiders, or whatever it was that made those cat's eyes sometimes flare with a killing rage.

The eight Maidens here now were mostly above average height, although only two were taller than Muhbaras. None had the eye-catching northern fairness, but none had the round features and close-curved hair that in some Maidens hinted of Black Kingdoms blood.

Indeed, the Lady of the Mists seemed to have recruited her Maidens (or accepted those who offered themselves) from every known land save Khitai and perhaps Vendhya. (And there were Maidens who seemed to bear a trace of Vendhyan blood; perhaps full Vendhyan women were too slight for the burdens of war?)

Few (here, only one of the eight) could be called truly beautiful. But all of them had grace, strength, suppleness, and knowledge of their weapons. There was not one the captain had seen whom he would have cast out from a war band—or refused in his bed.

Perhaps the Lady of the Mists knew more about the art of war than he suspected. She seemed to have picked warriors to guard her, at any rate, and the captain had known lords descended from long lines of soldiers whose household troops would not meet that test. Those fat sots at Lord Cleakas's—they would be mice facing cats if the Maidens ever came over the walls—

A measured, distant drumbeat stole on Muhbaras's ears. He looked about, saw nothing, but heard the drumbeat swelling. Now he heard two drums, not quite together, the shuffle of feet, and the faintest chinking of

armor.

Danar son of Araubas was coming up to his last moments of life.

The captain took a deep breath, then let it out slowly, and with it a prayer to as many gods as he could name with that much breath.

*Defend Danar's honor, all you who honor courage.*

Before Conan's little band was done with the second hour of its journey, the Cimmerian's war-trained blue eyes had picked twenty spots where they could have been ambushed. Perhaps ten against a larger band, but no fewer than twenty against the handful he led, and perhaps more.

He decided that he could well have taken his own advice to Khezal, and not thought the enemy's chief less wise than he appeared to be. Conan's band was too small to do much harm to the chief's plans even if it reached its destination intact. It could be ignored while the tribesmen assembled against Khezal.

Or perhaps the chief had divided his band in turn, and would engage the Cimmerian at the last moment with a handful of men, too few to be sent far from their main body. If Conan overcame the ambush, he would only be set upon by superior strength when he had exhausted his.

The Cimmerian gave a mirthless chuckle. The chief knew neither Cimmerians, Afghulis, nor (to do them justice) the picked desert riders of Yezdigerd's host if he thought them easy to weary. His men would pay in blood for that mistake.

One thing Conan knew: The watcher on the ridge was no trick of the eyes or the heat of the desert. So battle, there would be, and before nightfall.

That time was not so far away as it had been. The shadows were longer, even if the heat was hardly less. Above distant hilltops, carrion birds that had sought their nests during the worst of the day now circled, black specks against harsh blue. They would not watch for fresh meat in vain.

Two more good ambush spots came and went. Conan's neck was beginning to stiffen from trying to look in all directions at once. He twisted his head back and forth to loosen the muscles. A moment's slowness in seeing or striking a foe had turned good warriors into vulture's fodder.

Now they were entering another dry wash, with the steep right side gouged and furrowed by flash floods since the time of Atlantis, the other

side a slope almost gentle enough for a pasture. At the very top of the leftward slope the ground leapt up in a wall of rock, with a few gaps in it. From where Conan sat his saddle, he thought a mouse might have squeezed through those gaps, if it fasted for a week and then oiled its fur—

Dust boiled up from the foot of the wall, and in the dust Conan saw two-legged shapes much larger than mice. The dust rose, but the shapes turned into men, running down the slope toward the valley floor, leaping over boulders and dips in the ground with the antelope-grace of the desert tribesmen.

To Conan, this seemed a poorly laid ambush in an ill-chosen spot. The running men would be good archery targets the moment Conan's men had the shelter of the rocks to their right. But men died at the hands of bungling foes as well as of wise ones. Conan would give the tribesmen no unnecessary advantage.

He wheeled his horse, guiding it with his knees as he raised both hands over his head. He held his sword crosswise in those hands, and the men behind him took the signal. They in turn wheeled their horses, then swung about in their saddles. All had bows and full quivers, all had arrows nocked by the time their horses' heads were turned, and all shot before they entered the shadow of the rocks.

The range was easy for Turanian or even Afghuli bows against man-sized targets, even when the bowmen were shooting in haste. More tribesmen went down than arrows flew out, as some of the un-wounded runners flung themselves down, out of fear or perhaps to succor the wounded.

This gave Conan more hope for victory or at least seeing the day out. The enemy did not seem to understand that if they had few archers, they had to close quickly against Conan's band or risk being too weak to win the final grapple.

Meanwhile, Conan's men were disappearing into the rugged ground to the right. He heard human curses and equine protests as the men urged their mounts up slopes more suited for goats than horses. He also heard the whine of more arrows flying. At least one tribesman regained his courage, leapt to his feet, and promptly dropped again with an arrow through his throat.

Then human screams joined the horses' neighings from among the rocks. Conan leapt from the saddle, slapped his mare on the rump to send her uphill, and scrambled for the top of the nearest rock. If he had to make a target of himself to see what was going on, that was part of a captain's

work.

Conan was not yet halfway up the rock when his questions were answered. He heard Farad shouting, "They've more in the rocks! Rally, rally, rally!" and hoped that the Turanians understood Afghuli.

Then he heard war cries from the running men in the open, sending echoes bouncing off the rocks. No, not echoes. Living throats were blaring those cries, the living throats of new enemies waiting among the rocks for Conan's men to be driven into their hands like sheep into the wolves' jaws.

Conan supposed that he could take some consolation in the skill of the chief who would be able to boast of ending the Cimmerian's career. He was not sure what else the situation had to commend it.

Other, that is, than the certainty of dying with sword in hand and comrades round about, if he didn't sit on this rock gawking like a herdboyc at a country fair until the enemy found an archer who could see his hand in front of his face.

"Crom!"

It was not an appeal to the cold god of Cimmeria, for he did not listen to such appeals. It was more in the nature of a reminder, that here a Cimmerian warrior was about to die, and the manner of his death should be properly noted.

The god's name echoed around the rocks, drowning out all other cries human and animal, and left a brief, stunned silence in its wake. In the midst of that silence, Conan gathered himself, then leapt down from the rock, sword in hand.

The procession came up the path toward Captain Muhbaras, eight Maidens before Danar and eight behind. At the very rear walked a figure robed and hooded so thoroughly that she might have been a priestess passing through the marketplace, vowed to shield herself from profane eyes.

Under that hood, though, gleamed the golden cat's eyes, and the flowing, supple gait would have revealed the figure's identity even without the eyes.

The Lady of the Mists was coming as she had promised, to deal death for unlawful desire.

It would be a hard death, too. Danar was bound with thongs holding his hands behind his back and a short length of chain linking his ankles,

barely long enough to allow him a shuffling, hobbled gait. His eyes were wide open and alert, although several welts on face and neck showed where he'd learned the unwisdom of looking about him.

Neither drugged nor wounded, he would see his death coming and feel it for as long as the Lady wished him to—which might be hours if she wished to set an example. Muhbaras hardened his heart all over again and wished that he could briefly stop his ears and blind his eyes.

The Maidens guarding the captain drew back, to allow their sisters room to file onto the level rock. By the time all were present, they needed to stand practically shoulder to shoulder around the rim of the platform to leave an open space in the middle.

Into that space Danar marched, as steadily as if he were reporting for roll call. Only the sheen of sweat on his bronzed face betrayed unease of mind.

Muhbaras forced a smile. It was not much of a final gift to a good man. He wanted to cry to the mountains and the skies as well as these accursed women:

"See how a soldier of Khoraja dies, and learn from his death the kind of enemies you make by this madness!"

But the mountains and the skies would not answer; any reply would come from the magic of the Lady of the Mists or the spears and swords of the Maidens.

Conan hoped to land among the ranks of his enemies, like a boulder plunging from a cliff. That could confuse stouter warriors than the tribesmen, and confused opponents did not last long against the Cimmerian.

But either the second part of the ambush had miscarried, or else Conan's men were holding their own for the moment. Neither seemed impossible; rough ground with an enemy lurking around a corner every five paces served both sides equally ill. It reminded Conan of fighting house to house, something he had done often enough to know that he would gladly never do it again.

It was only three paces before he faced opponents, two of them already engaged with a Greencloak. The Greencloak was at a further disadvantage through being pinned by the leg under his dying horse, but he was defending himself with desperate vigor. All his opponents' attention was on him, and they had none to spare for the Cimmerian when he came

upon them.

With surprise and an edge in reach, Conan made easy prey of the first tribesman. He fell with his skull split from crown to the bridge of his nose, brains and blood spurting over the dead horse and the fallen Greencloak. His scimitar fell with a clang, in easy reach of the Greencloak, who snatched it up.

For a moment more blades were in action than there was space for their wielding. The Greencloak slashed wildly at his opponent with the scimitar in one hand and his own tulwar in the other. The tribesman tried to parry Conan's broadsword with his own scimitar, while at the same time drawing a dagger for use on the Greencloak.

The clanging as wildly swinging steel collided was worthy of a blacksmith shop. The Greencloak only nicked the tribesman's knee, but the collision of tribal scimitar and Cimmerian broadsword halted both strokes. It also broke the tribesman's grip on his weapon.

It clattered on the rocks, and the tribesman had only time to fling his dagger before Conan closed the distance. Nothing met the broadsword's second swing, until it opened the tribesman's throat and windpipe, nearly taking his head from his shoulders. More blood flowed over the dead horse as the second tribesman collapsed on top of the first.

Conan did not notice where the flung dagger had gone until the Greencloak cried out at the Cimmerian's grip on his shoulder. Then Conan saw the dagger thrust three fingers into the man's left shoulder. He plucked it out, wiped it on his breeches, thrust it into his belt, and finished dragging the Greencloak out from under the horse.

"Best pack that with something," Conan said, pointing at the bleeding shoulder. "Or can you fight left-handed?"

The man nodded.

"Better a right-handed fighter than a left-handed corpse," Conan said. "Now stay close by me, while we find our comrades."

"Ah—eh—if they're dead—?"

"If they were dead," Conan growled, "we wouldn't be hearing any fighting upslope. If they are dead, they may have killed enough foes to let us escape.

And if you don't follow me up the hill, the folk from across the valley will surely kill you if I don't do it first."

He did not quite prod the Greencloak in the small of the back with the

point of his broadsword. He did not need to. The soldier lunged up the slope as if he were an unwounded runner on level ground, shouting the motto of the Greencloaks as he went.

"Our blood is our honor!"

The Lady of the Mists stepped into the center of the circle. Muhbaras noted that she was carrying a long staff, taller than she was, in the form of a serpent—the giant asp of the jungles east of Vendhya, to be precise. It had one ruby eye and one emerald eye, and down its length flowed, instead of scales, those unnameable runes that the captain had seen far too often since he came to the Valley of the Mists.

The Lady stopped just behind Danar, and thrust the staff down to the rock three times. Each time the rock boomed under the blow like a giant's drum. Muhbaras was uneasily conscious of how ancient the stonework of this balcony was, and how far it jutted out over a drop clear to the bottom of the valley. He even thought he saw the Maidens betray some unease, by the lift of a shoulder or the flicker of an eye, but for the most part they were doing their usual imitation of statues.

The Lady struck a fourth time—and this time no drum-thunder rolled out across the Valley. In silence the staff seemed to sink into the rock and stand there as if it had grown there. It did not so much as quiver—although Muhbaras thought that he saw a glow in the ruby eye, and perhaps also in the emerald one.

The Lady made a commanding gesture with her left hand, and eight Maidens marched forward from their places around the platform, until they made a tight circle around Danar and the staff. One unlocked the chains from his ankles.

Now an equally commanding gesture of the Lady's right hand set the Maidens to lifting Danar bodily, as if he were a barrel of wine or a sheep's carcass. For a moment Muhbaras thought that Danar's fate was to be impalement, and wondered at the Lady's lack of imagination if she could contrive no worse end for him.

Then the captain saw that they were lifting Danar so that the staff would rise up between his back and his bound hands. He would be as helpless as if he had actually been bound to it, and there would be no need to unbind his hands at any point.

Danar rose, then descended until only the top of his head was visible among the gleaming hair of the Maidens. For a long moment that, too,

disappeared— then in the next moment Maidens were flung in all directions like sheep charged by a lion.

Danar burst out of the circle of Maidens with both hands free. His bonds dangled from his wrists, and in his right hand was a small dagger. He leapt over a Maiden who had gone sprawling and dashed for the edge of the platform, where a gap showed between two other Maidens.

"Your pardon, ladies," Danar said, as the women raised spears and moved to close the gap. At least that was what it sounded like to Muhbaras.

What he did know to his dying day was that Danar spoke to the Maidens preparing to kill him as courteously as he might have to a highborn woman with her daughter who found themselves in the path of his war chariot.

The tone had its effect. Or perhaps it was the dagger in Danar's hand. He feinted with it at the right-hand maiden, lashed out at her sister with the end of the thongs on his left wrist, and made the gap anew.

It was more than wide enough to let him reach the edge of the platform and, without breaking stride, leap into space.

Conan followed the Greencloak up the slope at a less frantic pace. Once again he was trying to look in every direction at once, for all that in some directions his eyes met solid rock just beyond the end of his nose.

He still saw too many men coming across the valley, and fewer but still uncomfortably many atop the ridge on this side. He and his comrades were boxed in as thoroughly as if they had been in a dungeon, and stone walls would have been only a trifle harder to break through than such a horde of tribesmen.

Then he noticed that the battle din from up the slope was dying away, faster than it should. Either his men had been overrun, or they had beaten off at least one attack, which ought to be impossible—

His eagerness to solve the mystery nearly ended Conan's life. He came around a rock into full view of archers higher up, and they promptly put a dozen arrows through the space where he had been standing. Nothing but a hillman's speed held his wounds to scratches. That same preternatural speed let him scoop up a handful of usable arrows before he leapt again.

This time he landed on something alive and foul-smelling, which swore Afghuli oaths fit to crack rocks or cause landslides.



"Farad, I heard you shouting. How fare we?"

Farad coughed so long and loud that Conan suspected sarcasm. "The men fare well, save for one dead and another fallen under his horse—or is that the one who dashed past me as if his breeches were aflame?"

"The same. I had some trouble bringing him up. Now that you've your breath back and your ribs intact, I repeat my question."

"We've beaten off one attack, on our right." Farad waved an arm in that general direction. "Nobody came down against our left, for which the gods be praised as that would have been the end of us."

"Are their men not yet in position on our left?" If so, then Conan's men had received only a stay of execution, not a full pardon.

"Oh, they hold the heights all across our front, Conan. But they've no manhood, the ones on our left. They hardly put a head up; when they do, they seldom shoot; and when they shoot, it's not to hit. If those weaklings had all the arrows in the world—"

Conan held up a hand. Battle-honed instincts made him see possibilities in this situation that had escaped Farad. It would be best not to get anyone's hopes up, however.

"My thanks. While there's a lull, I'm going up to scout on the left."

Had Danar's leap been a spell to turn all who saw it into stone, there could not have been more silence or less movement on the balcony. Muhbaras alone contained himself out of fear. The rest seemed unable to believe that what their eyes had seen was really what had happened.

To suspect one's eyes of so misleading one would unsettle anyone, Muhbaras suspected. At least *he* had no doubts—and indeed, he was already composing the tribute to Danar he would send to the soldier's kin, if he had any and if Muhbaras himself lived to set pen to parchment again—

The Maidens ceased to be statues. So did the Lady of the Mists. With hands raised, she advanced on the eight Maidens standing about the staff. A crimson nimbus sprang into existence around her right hand; a fainter golden light seemed to drip like water from her left hand.

The two colors cascaded down to the stone, splashed upward like water, and merged. They formed a sphere the size of a large melon, mostly crimson, shot with gold, and throwing off sparks. The sphere began to rotate—as it seemed to Muhbaras, in three different directions as once.

He would have called that impossible—except that since he came to the Valley of the Mists, Muhbaras had purged that word from his lips. It could only make one apt to be surprised—and the Lady and her Maidens held enough surprises for a soldier who kept his wits.

The sphere now floated upward, still spinning, with sparks of both colors cascading down so thickly that one could not see anyone through it. It rose higher and seemed to be moving toward the ring of Maidens.

It darted forward, until it was over the place where Danar had leapt.

Then Muhbaras clapped his hands over his ears, and before he squeezed his eyes shut, saw others doing the same. All seemed to be hearing the scream of one being flayed alive, a scream that told all who heard that it would go on until the end of time and perhaps beyond it until the gods themselves brought an end to it—

He kept his feet, and so did most of the Maidens. Some of them staggered, however, and a handful went to their knees.

Only the Lady of the Mists stood unaffected, her hands still raised, her breasts rising and falling a trifle more than usual under the robe as if she was breathing hard. Her eyes contrived to both glow and be utterly blank at the same time, while her lips were even paler than usual.

Then she gripped the staff with both hands, and it came free of the rock as easily as a weed from sodden ground. She tossed it with one hand and caught it with the other, whirled it, and seemed almost ready to break into a dance.

Dancing was the last thing Muhbaras felt like doing. His highest hope was that his legs and stomach would not betray him until he was safely beyond the Gate of the valley.

He had not believed that the Lady could conjure more horrors. The next moment proved him wrong. Danar, or at least a human figure more like him than not, floated up from the valley. It was as though an invisible hand had caught him before he found the merciful death he sought, and raised him to be prey to the Lady's torments.

For very surely the screams came from the human figure held there in the air before Muhbaras's horror-struck eyes.

## **Nine**

Conan reined in his urge to rush upslope as he would have reined in a

pair of fractious chariot horses. Haste on broken ground leads more often to falls than to safe arrival, even for a surefooted hillman.

It also draws an enemy's attention, which Conan wished to avoid as long as possible. His comrades below lacked the numbers to force the enemy's archers to keep their heads down or even to spoil their shooting, if they chose to rejoin the fray.

So Conan moved with the stealth of a leopard, finding cover in cracks and hiding in pools of shadow that a watcher would have thought too small for a man his size. He also moved with the silence of a cobra, testing each handhold and footrest before putting weight on it. Little dust rose to mark his passage, and only the smallest pebbles rolled silently downhill.

As he climbed, the rocks grew smaller but the ground grew otherwise more rugged. At times the only route that offered concealment also required him to call on his mountaineering skills. Fortunately these were fresh in his memory, as much of Afghulistan reared itself up into slopes that challenged even its own goat-footed tribesfolk or even Cimmerians.

Conan finished climbing a short rock chimney with his feet against one side and his back against another. The ground at the upper end offered just enough hiding places to let him stop, catch his breath, spit dust from his mouth (although he still did not care to have his teeth touch one another), and listen to the progress of the battle.

Or rather, listen *for* the progress of the battle, without hearing it. Both above and below, the enemy seemed to have sat down to wait, not even hurling the occasional arrow or slingstone at a venture into the rocks where Conan's band lay hidden. Conan listened for war cries and curses, but heard only coughs and sneezes, and beyond that the crack of rocks breaking in the heat, the sigh of the wind, and distant birdcalls from high above.

Of course, such a silence had in Conan's experience also meant the enemy slipping into his comrades' position and cutting their throats. But he did not believe that the Turanian had yet been born who could do that to one Afghuli tribesman, let alone half a dozen—unless he was of Afghuli blood himself...

A sound from above cut short the Cimmerian's brief speculations. It was the sound of a man crawling, trying to be silent but having rather less than complete success at it.

Then other sounds joined the first one. Somebody was calling out, trying to be heard close by but not at any great distance. The call abruptly cut off, and Conan heard what sounded remarkably like a struggle.

Meanwhile, the crawling man was drawing closer. Conan judged that the man would be close enough to spit on if he continued downhill for as long as it might take to empty a mug of good ale.

Then from above someone cried out in rage, someone else in agony. Neither seemed concerned about being overheard at a distance; indeed both shouted loud enough to be heard in Aghrapur. A frantic scrabbling told of the crawling man increasing his pace.

Then a bearded, wild-eyed head peered over a rock just beyond Conan's reach. Instantly shouts rose from all around the rim, and the Cimmerian heard the whistle of arrows. Whether this man was friend or foe, Conan judged that he must know *something* that it would be well to learn. Turned into a pincushion by archers, he would die without speaking.

Conan lunged out of cover and grabbed a handful of greasy black hair with one hand, the neck of a patched and weather-faded robe with the other. Then he heaved backward. The man flew over the Cimmerian's head, screaming in panic as he saw himself about to plunge headfirst down the chimney.

He did not do so, because Conan twisted with the agility of an eel, shifting his grip as he did so. His hands closed around the man's ankles. But he was off balance for a moment—the moment in which all the weight of the man came on his wrists.

Conan dug in his feet, but an arrow creased the back of his knees. The sudden sting made him start, and that broke the grip of his toes. At the same moment the man squalled as if he were being impaled, which drew more arrows, and struggled wildly.

The Cimmerian felt himself sliding. Both his own honor and the need to keep the prisoner alive barred him from just letting go. Instead he tried to turn the slide into a leap, but he had no time. He was still turning, trying to get his feet under him to land softly, when he slid over the edge of the chimney and plunged down.

The Lady of the Mists let out a screech like a mating wildcat. The sphere of fire instantly swelled to three times its previous size and leaped toward Danar's suspended form.

Colors that Muhbaras would not have believed possible in Hell blazed in the Lady's eyes. They were mirrored in the sphere. It lost its spherical shape and licked out now more like the tongue of an immense serpent.

Its flame-shot core drove between two Maidens, so close that its fringes

touched them. Each fell backward as if kicked by a horse, sprawling on the stone with clatters of armor. Some of their comrades hesitated, but others sprang forward to drag them to safety.

Muhbaras gave scant attention to what was happening on the platform. Instead he stared at what was happening to Danar. He hung in midair like a soap bubble as a web of fire wove itself around him, forming now obscene figures, now goutts of flame in sap-phire and emerald hues, at once dazzling and unwholesome.

Each time the Lady of the Mists raised her hands, the web grew tighter. Each time Muhbaras caught a glimpse of Danar, he bore more signs of torment. His mouth was open in a soundless scream and his back arched until his spine had to be ready to snap.

Then the fire closed around what had been a living man, but his being gone from sight did not mean the end of the torment. Instead the Lady allowed Danar's scream out of the fire—and Muhbaras had never heard a viler sound in all his years of warfare.

Then Muhbaras shut his ears and strode forward with his sword in one hand and his dagger in the other. Before anyone, Lady or Maiden, could move spell or steel to halt him, he tossed the dagger, caught it by the point, then flung it into the sphere of fire.

It was long range for anyone who had not learned the art of the throwing knife at ten and won prizes in the bazaar at twelve (and been beaten by his father for dealing with such lowborn folk). Also, Muhbaras had spent little time at practice of late.

His hand and eye still marched together. The dagger vanished into the fire. As it did, Muhbaras saw the Lady turn toward him—and raised his sword until its point thrust into the tongue of fire streaming from the Lady.

*Mitra be my witness and guard my men, I cannot do otherwise.*

Good fortune was with the Cimmerian and his prisoner in their fall. They landed on sand, with the prisoner uppermost, and Conan's ribs were sheathed in iron-hard muscle. He also had skill in jumping and falling that a carnival tumbler might have envied.

The fall still knocked the breath out of him, and he was slow to rise. Fortunately his captive was as breathless from fear as the Cimmerian was from the fall. The man only attempted his escape after Conan was fit to prevent it, with a large hand clamped firmly around the handiest ankle.

The man cursed and opened his mouth to scream, then appeared to see Conan clearly for the first time. His mouth stayed open, until he croaked words that sounded like:

"You—no—Girumgi man?"

The tongue was Turanian, but such a thick dialect that Conan was not sure what was being said.

"I am not Girumgi," Conan said, in Turanian, as if he were speaking to a child. "I mean you no harm, nor do any of my friends. Come with me."

The words seemed to escape the man's understanding, but the tone and the gestures carried enough meaning. Also, the man was short and lean even for a desert tribesman. The Cimmerian could have carried a man of that size under each arm, and the man seemed to prefer using his own feet to such a fate.

They made a good pace back to shelter. The enemy above seemed to be wholly lost in their shouting contest. Conan preferred to rejoin his comrades before the shouting turned back to shooting. As for the men below, the ground was against them, but numbers were for them. Their not coming on was another mystery, and two mysteries on the same battlefield were two more than the Cimmerian enjoyed facing.

Battles were confusing enough when everybody did what he was supposed to. When he did not, only a god could see some pattern in the chaos of a battle.

If he had owed nothing to comrades, the Cimmerian would have been using the enemy's confusion to show them all a clean pair of heels. When others' lives hung on your continued presence, however—

Farad was the first to greet Conan, and motioned quickly to a low cave whose mouth had been dug free while Conan was garnering the prisoner. It was too shallow to be much of a last refuge, and held no water—not that the battle was likely to exhaust even the single water bag apiece Conan's band was carrying.

"No attacks?" the Cimmerian said.

Farad looked at the sky. "Would we be here if there had been? And who is this aged boy?"

Again the man understood Farad's tone rather than his Afghuli words, and drew a dagger. Conan promptly slapped it out of his hand, then retrieved it and thrust it into his own belt.

"You are lucky to be alive," he said. "I will keep this knife until you have

told us what is happening uphill. Why do you fear the Girumgi?"

The man began babbling a hasty explanation, of which Conan understood possibly two words out of three. He found more sense in the man's tale when he remembered that the Girumgi were one of the more powerful of the desert tribes.

Before the man had finished his explanation, Conan heard the shouting atop the hill die away. As it did, he thought he also heard Turanian war horns, but so far away that it was impossible to tell whether it was a trick of the desert wind moaning around the rocks.

Conan signaled with his hand to Farad: *Make ready for an attack*. Farad nodded and undid his belt, to bind the prisoner's hands. The man's eyes rolled up until only the whites showed.

Conan glared. "He will cut your throat if you do not submit, and I will not stop him."

"No—I fight—I friend you—I fight Girumgi—" he said, with frantic gestures uphill and toward the right.

That told Conan that the Girumgi had been pressing the attack more vigorously, but not enough else to dispel the mystery. He nodded to Farad, who looped the thong around the man's wrists and started to pull it tight.

Then demons seemed to break loose on the hill above. Fifty men at least were screaming, in defiance, terror, or mortal agony. Above the screaming rose unmistakable Turanian war horns, this time not far away at all. Even better, some of the war cries were also Turanian.

Conan looked at the prisoner, who had fainted. Then he looked at Farad, who returned a "Do you take me for an oracle?" expression.

The Cimmerian shifted to the nearest position that might allow him to see what was going on uphill, or tell where he could send an arrow without skewering a friend!

Muhbaras did not expect another life in another world, for he had served too many bad masters for far too long. He also did not expect anyone to speak well of the manner of his death, or compose about it a poem that would be sung in the halls of Khorajan nobles for centuries or even moons to come. He did expect that his death would make amends to Danar's spirit, if it did not end his torment.

What Muhbaras did not know about sorcery and witchcraft would fill several long and closely written scrolls. He did know, however, that the

presence of cold iron, such as a sword blade, could hinder many spells.

All this whirled through Muhbaras's thoughts in the heartbeat between his lifting the sword and its entering the fire. Then he staggered backward as the tongue of fire jerked upward, snatching the sword from his hand so violently that the shagreen grip left his palm bloody.

Like a mortally stricken serpent, the tongue of fire writhed wildly in the air. The Lady of the Mists braced her legs and clutched at her end of it like a drowning man clutching at a rope. Muhbaras heard her chanting, then screaming, loud enough to be heard over Danar's agony, but was too surprised at still being alive to look closely at the Lady's face.

Too surprised, and also too fearful that if she took serious notice of him, his death would be next and in a form that made Danar's look mild. He had not fallen dead the moment his sword pierced the fire. He judged this to mean that something far worse awaited him.

Then Danar's cry ended. The fire around him vanished, and only gray ash remained, drifting down into the valley on the evening breeze, past life, past pain, past fear.

The Lady chanted on, and the tongue of fire now lashed about like the tail of an immense cat. Everyone gave it ample room, except the Lady who commanded it and Muhbaras. He stood as if his feet had turned to stone and joined with the balcony. Indeed, he had to look down to be sure that this had not happened.

He was alive, but knew this could not last long. Since he was a dead man who yet stood, he would not fling aside the dignity of this last moment by seeking to run.

Perhaps his death would not pass unnoticed—at least among the Maidens. Some of them had the souls of women rather than witches. Danar had proved that. They might not be such ready tools for their mad mistress with the example of Muhbaras's death in front of them.

Suddenly the tongue of fire shrank from the height of a tree to the height of a man in a single instant. Then it shrank further, into a sphere no larger than an apple, and fell to the stone. As it struck, it vanished—but smoke rose where it struck, and Muhbaras saw stone bubble and fume as it ran liquid.

They stood, sorceress and mercenary, staring at one another across a patch of cooling lava no wider than a footstool but seemingly as wide as the valley itself for all that either could cross it. The silence around them seemed as solid as bronze or stone, encasing their limbs so firmly that the



mere thought of movement seemed futile.

Only the rise and fall of the Lady's breasts told Muhbaras that she yet lived. He could not have told why he knew that he lived, yet he did—and as the moments flowed one into another, he began to wonder if he might go on living.

*Do not hope. Death that snatches away hope is the harshest.*

That was an old lesson, in books any boy born to be a soldier knew almost as soon as he could mount a horse. Muhbaras clung to it, but he also clung to the thought that he had done something the Lady of the Mists could not have expected, and did not know what to make of it.

As long as she doubted, Muhbaras might live.

It did not occur to him to try to escape while the Lady stood bemused and doubting, perhaps for the first time since she bent the valley to her will. Had he been able to form the reason for this completely, it would have been that any movement by him would break this fragile truce, and make the Lady lash out wildly.

His own death was certain, a death he had faced to end Danar's torment. He would not bring death to the Maidens if he could contrive otherwise.

A sound broke the silence—the clang of steel on stone. Muhbaras still did not move. He did not need to. Without so much as moving his eyes, he saw his sword lying on the stone between him and the Lady.

He had expected the sword to be a blackened, twisted relic of itself. Instead it gleamed as if the finest armorer in the world had lavished entire days bringing out the luster in the steel. Jewels winked in the hilt where only a few disks of silver had shone before—but they did not make the weapon useless.

"Take it up," the Lady said. At least that was what Muhbaras thought he heard, although he could not have sworn the words were not coming from the air. He did know, however, that it would be ill done to make the Lady repeat herself.

He squatted, and without taking his eyes from the Lady's face, lifted his sword. It felt lighter than before, yet as well balanced as ever.

One heard about such swords, in old tales of heroes who had died when the waves still rolled over the fresh grave of Atlantis. One did not imagine seeing one's own blade transformed into such a weapon.

"Cut off a lock of your hair with your blade, honored captain," the Lady

said. This time Muhbaras knew that it was she who spoke. He also knew that disobeying was impossible. Never mind the possible consequences—disobeying was a thought that did not enter his mind.

He had cut a lock of hair, the edge of his sword shearing through it effortlessly, when he remembered another bit of witch lore.

*Give a witch anything of yours, particularly part of your body, and she can conjure potent spells against you, or at least to serve herself.*

Muhbaras allowed this thought to linger in his mind. Then he deliberately thought of refusing.

Instead of blasting him to ashes on the spot, the Lady of the Mists smiled. It was the smile of one to whose face such an expression is newly come and not altogether welcome. It seemed as if she was trying to put herself as well as him at ease.

This seemed improbable to the last degree. Had the Lady any vestige of conscience, she would not have done as she had to Danar. If she felt remorse, it was too late for a good soldier.

But her face was shaping itself into a smile, and after a moment, Muhbaras returned it. After another moment he stepped forward, but he did not hold out the lock of hair, nor put from his mind the thought of refusing it.

"You have nothing to fear from the gift of your substance, honored captain," the Lady said. She looked him up and down with those golden cat's eyes. Muhbaras could not escape the thought that here was a woman considering him as a man. There had been—not tenderness—but what might be called warmth in her eyes.

That thought also provoked no death-dealing spells.

Muhbaras took another step forward, and this time the Lady also moved. Cool fingers touched his, reaching as high as his wrist, briefly gripping it, then withdrawing with the lock of hair clasped between thumb and forefinger.

As the Lady of the Mists withdrew her hand, Muhbaras noted that her fingernails were a muted shade of the same gold as her eyes.

Then he noticed nothing more, until he found himself standing amid a rising wind, with light almost gone from the sky and eight Maidens standing around him in a circle.

It did not surprise him that the Maidens now looked like impatient women rather than daughters of a warrior goddess. It did not even

surprise him that some of them were shivering noticeably in the onrushing chill of the evening.

His voice came out strongly when he spoke, what he hoped would be the last surprise of the evening.

"All of you need not come, unless our Lady commands it. I only need guides to the mouth of the valley."

"Our Lady commands all," one of the Maidens said, in a voice almost as flat as before.

It seemed they had not unbent enough to follow his suggestions rather than their Lady's command.

Conan had not found a good shooting spot when the primal chaos seemed to descend on the hillside. Dust rose like a young sandstorm, and out of the brown cloud warriors rolled, fell, leaped, and ran.

In spite of the dust, Conan could tell that some were tribal warriors—no doubt the Girumgi, although he did not remember the pattern of their headdress. The rest were Turanian Greencloaks. Clearly Khezal's roving band had scented trouble in time to ride to Conan's rescue.

The arrival of friends did not, however, ensure Conan's victory or even his survival. Desperate tribesmen were swarming downhill, and they outnumbered the Cimmerian's band two or three to one. Also, the tribesmen could shoot both uphill and down with small risk of striking friends. The Turanians both above and below were not so fortunate.

*Best hold with steel*, Conan thought, then shouted that aloud.

One Afghuli archer protested; Farad made to snatch his bow and looked ready to break it. The archer slung his bow and drew a long knife, which to Conan looked much the best weapon for close-quarters work.

Then the Girumgi came down upon them. Conan spared one glance to the left flank, where nobody seemed to be either shouting or shooting now. Then his world shrank to the rocks on either side and the dust-caked, wild-eyed opponent in front of him.

He swung hard from the right at one tribesman's rib cage and caught the man's left arm as it swung down. The man's forearm and tulwar fell to the ground; he howled and tried to push his spouting stump in the Cimmerian's face. Conan's blade ended that dying effort, shearing deep into the man's torso and reaching his heart.

He fell in a narrow passage between two rocks, partly blocking it. Conan

half-turned, snatched up a rock, and flung it left-handed at the next man to appear in the passage. It turned his face to bloody jam as he stumbled forward on the point of Conan's newly drawn dagger and fell atop his comrade.

An arrow *whssshed* close to the Cimmerian's ear, from the right. He faced that way, snatching up another rock and leaping forward as well. The tribesman who'd shot was too close for a throw, so close he ought not to have been able to miss. But panic or even haste will make the best warrior hardly more than a child—certainly much less than a Conan.

The Cimmerian struck the archer with his stone-weighted left hand, while thrusting over the man's shoulder with his sword. The first man's head snapped back hard enough to break his neck, and he crashed into the man behind at the same moment Conan's steel entered the second one's throat. Again two tribesmen fell, almost atop one another.

But Conan now stood in an open space, with rocks all around that might hide archers and two entrances that might let tribesmen outflank him. He gave ground, drifting to the left. Along that way lay a single narrow passage with both flanks secure and only room for one man to come at him.

Conan had to kill but one tribesman on the way to that narrow passage. From the shouting and screaming to either side of him, not to say the clang of steel, he judged his comrades were having better fortune.

He hoped so. They had to beat down the fleeing tribesmen before their comrades below realized what was going on. If they came up to help, they could still catch Conan's men between two fires.

It was the fleeing tribesmen who were overwhelmed in the next few moments. Each of Conan's men fought like two, and although there were more tribesmen than the Cimmerian had reckoned, in the end that made no difference.

Conan had just found a moment to catch his breath and roughly clean his blades when more shouting broke out below. Mingled with the human cries were the frightened neighs and agonized death-screams of horses.

Again, some of those war cries were Turanian.

Conan had just time to think that this battle was growing mysterious when more fleeing tribesmen came in sight. These appeared to come from the valley below, and they seemed as eager to climb the hill as their comrades had been to descend.

Like their comrades, they outnumbered Conan's band even had it been

at full strength. As Conan had seen at least one Afghuli lying dead or gravely hurt, that strength had to be less full than a captain could wish.

"Crom!" the Cimmerian swore. "These tribal lice won't let a man even stop to clean his sword."

Then he strode forward to strike the new foes, but leaped backward as arrows hailed about him, and one tore at his left forearm. The wound would slow him by nightfall, but the battle would not last that long, and he had fought all day with half a dozen such wounds.

The arrow did the Cimmerian no great hurt. What nearly ended his career was a dying Girumgi who had been lying directly behind the Cimmerian. As Conan retreated, he grabbed Conan's ankles and jerked. Most men might as well have tried to shift the Kezankian Mountains, but the tribesman was a large man with the strength of the dying, and he caught Conan off balance.

Conan toppled, lashing out as he did. His fist grazed the man's jaw, but his head did not graze a protruding rock. A skull less thick than the Cimmerian's would have cracked open. Even the Cimmerian saw flame-shot darkness—and then the dying Girumgi rolling on top of him, dagger thrusting for his throat.

It never reached its goal. Suddenly a slight figure stood behind the tribesman, and a gold-hilted sword descended like the wrath of Crom. The tribesman's skull split apart, and his dagger thudded harmlessly on Conan's chest.

By now the Cimmerian could focus his eyes well enough to recognize the swordsman.

"Khezal. By Erlik's helm, you are timely come!"

"You must be seriously hurt, my friend. Such courtly speech from you goes against nature."

"Would you like me to rise up and strangle you to prove otherwise?"

"Hardly. I might ask for some of those jewels—"

"From my share, perhaps. If you take any from the Afghulis' portion, I will drop you headfirst down a dry well and then bury you in camel dung!"

Khezal pretended to cringe, then turned his head to listen to a distant sound beyond the reach of Conan's ears. (They were still ringing, and his stomach was grateful for being nearly empty.)

"That's the sergeant who was besieging your runaway Afghulis," Khezal said.

"What is *he* doing here?"

"When I learn, you will be the first to know. But he just told me that he and his men have driven off the horses of the tribesmen in the valley, and are pursuing the fugitives on foot."

"Better them than me," Conan said. He tried to sit up, and the ground swayed only moderately.

"Ho, a litter for Captain Conan!" Khezal shouted.

"I've had worse hurts falling out of my cradle," the Cimmerian grumbled.

"That was not so far to fall as it will be now with you full-grown," Khezal said. He pushed the Cimmerian back down. The fact that the Turanian could do it and that Conan did not care to resist proved to Conan that perhaps he should leave the rest of the battle in Khezal's hands.

It was, after all, thoroughly won, even if it would be a while before he knew exactly how. What would take longer to discover, he feared, was whether this was the last battle of the quest into the Kezankian

Mountains—or, as he very much suspected, only the first of many.

That was too sobering a thought for a man with an aching head, so Conan found a comfortable position and waited for the litter.

Captain Muhbaras rode down the path from the gate to the Valley toward his quarters. He normally walked, the path being rather too steep for horses, and a warrior's dignity prohibited an ass.

Tonight, however, he would lose even more dignity by falling on his nose and perhaps rolling down the hill than he would be riding an ass. His legs had not felt so weak since the first time he did a dawn-to-sunset march with a full pack.

The Lady of the Mists had been appraising him as a man. This he now could no longer doubt. She had also been doing it in full view of Maidens who might be neither loyal nor discreet. Thus whatever was in the Lady's thoughts might already be no secret.

Having a sorceress contemplating one in such a manner could hardly end happily, even if one had no thought for one's personal honor. The tales were many and various about the fate of a witch's lover, but none of them held much hope of avoiding a harsh fate.

However, offending the Lady of the Mists held out no hope of safety for Muhbaras's men. He had risked them to save his honor once, and by a

miracle or the whims of a sorceress who was yet a woman, he and they alike had escaped. This good fortune would not come a second time.

Muhbaras bore that thought as one might bear a wounded comrade at the end of a long day's battle, as he rode down the trail into shadows little relieved by the lanterns at the door of his quarters.

"So the Girumgi are at least toying with rebellion?" Conan asked.

"So it would seem," Khezal replied.

"One mystery solved," Conan grunted, and poured more wine into his cup.

"Are you sure—?" Khezal began.

"I am sure you did not learn war from Khadjar and your father to serve as my nurse," the Cimmerian growled. "My head barely aches. I see only what is held up in front of me. I have not spewed or fallen asleep."

"Which proves that Cimmerian heads really *are* harder than stone," Farad put in.

Conan threw up his hands in mock disgust. "Since my head is fit to hold thoughts, shall we think what to do next?"

The prisoner Conan had taken was from the Stone Clan of the Ekinari. The son of the chief of the Ekinari was sworn blood-brother to the chief of the Girumgi. This explained why Ekinari rode with Girumgi, but not altogether why they had not fought side by side.

"Even had you known the tribal speech, you could not have got from that man answers he did not know himself," Khezal went on. "Nor did it help matters that the rest of the Stone Clan or whoever were his comrades ran off as if fifty demons were at their heels."

"Demons, or perhaps all the surviving Girumgi," Farad said.

"Few enough of those, by Mitra's favor," Khezal said.

Being overconfident had brought better captains than Khezal to lonely graves, but Conan thought in this case the Turanian had the right of it. It seemed that Khezal was not the only one to march to the sound of Oman's battle.

The Greencloaks had been industriously besieging the fugitive Afghulis when the battle sounds rose. Convinced that the battle had to involve Conan coming to rescue them, the leader of the Afghulis called for a parley and offered truce terms.

The Afghulis would release all their hostages without ransom and return their weapons. In return, the Greencloaks would swear not to harm the Afghulis until they had fought and won against the common foe who was surely not far away.

The Greencloaks accepted this offer, and the truce was sworn to last until both sides were released from it by their respective captains. It seemed that the Greencloaks were as sure of Khezal's coming as the Afghulis were of Conan's, and also wished to join in battle under their beloved captain.

So Afghuli and Turanian rode out together, and made havoc in the rear of the tribesmen in the valley. They had a good plunder of weapons, horses, and baggage, and the bodies of some fifty tribesmen were feeding the vultures. The new allies had lost no more than seven, and Conan could see the stone cairn where they lay in the light of a dung fire.

Khezal was still a man to ride with, more so than ever now that the wisdom of years and the experience of many battles had joined his native wits. It was as well to have such a comrade on a quest, particularly one that showed every sign of sprouting new mysteries as fast as the old ones were answered.

Conan had sworn to ride north to aid Khezal in the Kezankian Mountains, and he would not break that oath if all the tribes of the desert and all their intriguing chiefs and chiefs' sons stood in his path. But he would not expect to come back alive, either.

## Ten

They were four days' ride north of the battle against the Girumgi. The Kezankian Mountains were peering over the northern horizon, with the eternal snowcaps of the higher peaks glinting pink at dawn and sunset. The breeze told of a world beyond the desert, at which Conan and the Afghulis rejoiced.

Khezal was less joyful, and thought he had cause, for all the Cimmerian's rough jests.

"Here we are, not far from the caravan routes," Conan said. "Yet you complain. There are wells for water, trees for shade, and even refuges for any of our men who fall ill or are taken by the sun. What do you want—dragons to fly us to the Kezankians in a trice?"

"I would rather bind them to seek out the mysteries in the mountains



and bring us back word of what they learn," Khezal replied.

"Not slay the wizards outright?"

"I'd not wager a dragon's power against wizards fit to do the half of what the tales say has happened," Khezal said, with a shrug. "Besides, I'm of your mind about dealing with spellcasters. Don't play their games, but close and feed them an arm's length of steel."

Conan nodded his approval. "Then what ails you, my friend?"

"Riding into yet another mystery is what ails me, and don't pretend you are any the less uneasy in your mind about that. Also, we have slain two score Girumgi, and if they are not in rebellion against the king, they will surely call themselves at blood-feud with us."

"Hah. There will be few Girumgi left to rebel if they stand to face us. Moreover, as long as we face that battle, your folk and mine will be readier to forget that they ever so much as exchanged harsh looks."

Khezal looked back at the Afghuli riding in a compact knot behind Conan. Certainly some Turanians rode easily beside them, chatting as if they'd been comrades for years. Other Greencloaks, however, kept their distance and wore baleful looks. The Afghulis, in turn, kept a sharp lookout and their sword hands free.

"Speak for your own men, as no doubt you can," Khezal said. "I am sure of most of mine, but there is always one with a heritage of blood-feud or grief for a lost comrade who can ruin the best-planned discipline. I'll guard your back, Conan, but I can hardly promise that will be enough."

"You're a warrior, not a god," Conan said, slapping Khezal on the shoulder nearly hard enough to tumble the slight Turanian from the saddle. Khezal mock-glared, then turned his eyes forward once more.

"We'd best start looking for a campsite near water," he said, after a moment. "In the middle of the camp, would be my choice."

"How so?"

"See that haze on the horizon?" Conan followed the other's pointing finger and nodded. The horizon did indeed seem blurred, as might be after an evening's drinking.

Except that no one among the riders had touched wine for longer than it was pleasant to remember.

"Sandstorm?"

"I see you have not forgotten everything you learned in the Turanian service."

"No, although one of the things I did forget was your tongue. Some day Yezdigerd may have it out by the roots."

"And you'll stand drinks for the executioner, of course?" The brittleness in Khezal's voice told Conan more than he cared to know about the uneasy situation honest men could face under the ruthless young king.

"I'll wring his neck and snatch you to life and freedom," the Cimmerian replied. "But I won't expect thanks for it."

"You know me well," Khezal said. "And now, if you know this desert, let us seek that campsite. At this time of year it's death to ride in a sandstorm and no small risk even to camp in one away from water. They can blow for days at a time."

The wind moaned steadily outside Muhbaras's quarters, occasionally rising to a shriek. He shivered, not so much at the wind's cry but at the man sitting across the room from him.

Through the smoke from the bronze brazier Ermik's face looked even more complacent and self-satisfied than usual. It was hard to believe, but all the man's time in the mountains had not cost him any flesh. Muhbaras wondered how much money he had spent in bribes squeezing banquets from the rocks, or perhaps how many pack animals he had killed bringing supplies from more civilized lands or even from Khoraja itself.

The spy had come to speak of a rumor abroad in the valley. After three cups of Muhbaras's wine, he had yet to put it into plain words.

Muhbaras hardened his voice. "I ask you for the last time. Put a name to the rumor or hold your piece."

"And what will you do if I do neither?" Ermik taunted.

"Do you wish to test me to the point of learning?" Muhbaras said. His voice was low, and to his own ears, that of a man dangerously near the end of his patience.

Ermik shrugged. "I have as many friends as before, and you have as few," he said. "What I speak of concerns how we may both have more friends here."

"We will have few friends and many enemies if you have been roaming where our men are not allowed," Muhbaras said wearily. "That also remains as true as it was before."

Ermik shrugged. "I doubt that your fears are wise counselors—"

"Either do not call me a coward or be prepared to lose your tongue,"

Muhbaras snapped.

This time Ermik did seem to recognize danger, at least when it took the form of a man within a heartbeat of drawing steel. He bowed his head, in a gesture at once graceful and contemptuous.

"I beg your pardon. I do not call you coward. Do you not call me fool, unless I give more proof of it than I think I have so far."

Ermik drew in breath.

"The Maidens say that the Lady of the Mists desires you, as a woman does a man. They did not say how they knew this, as this no doubt is part of the mysteries of the Valley of the Mist and its Lady. But the Maiden who told me swore such oaths by gods I knew, as well as by those I knew not, that I do not doubt she spoke the truth as far as she apprehended it."

That was unusual care in choosing words for Ermik, but surprise did not make Muhbaras less alert. He folded his hands across one silk-trousered knee. (Actually he folded the hands across the homespun knee patch on the silk. The trousers and several other silk garments were a gift from his sister, who had died in childbirth two years ago. Hard wear on campaign and in the mountains was rapidly reducing them to a state in which Muhbaras would hardly care to be buried in them, for all his affection for his sister's memory.)

"So we face a sorceress who has begun to think with her loins, as do many common women. Many common women also command their loins, or at least do not roam about like starving she-lions in search of a man to serve them."

"Many do, the more fools they when there are any number of willing men," Ermik said. "But I do not think the Lady of the Mists is one of them."

*If the truth be known, neither do I.* Red-hot pincers and boiling oil could not have drawn from the captain a description of the Lady's face, for Ermik's delectation. Of course, if the Maidens were women enough to recognize desire, the spy might not need such a description, either...

"Why me?" Even to his own ears, Muhbaras's words sounded pathetic.

Ermik laughed outright. "Why not you? I have not a woman's eye for judging a man, but no doubt the Lady sees in you what she needs."

"Yes, but why me, if her need is for a *man*?"

"Who can know the truth of a woman's will? Of course, you may be right. If she does not care greatly as to which man comes forward, I

might—"

"No!"

"Jealous?"

This time Muhbaras actually rose from his stool, although he stopped short of drawing his sword. He sat down, shaking his head, while Ermik had at least had the decency not to laugh again.

"The whole idea of bedding the Lady is near-kin to madness," Muhbaras said, when he knew he could command his voice. "One does not know what will please Her Magicalness, nor what will displease her, nor what she will do to the man who displeases her.

"Also, she is not being wise in regard to her Maidens. You would not know how this seems, to one who has commanded soldiers in battle."

"You see the Lady as a captain over her Maiden soldiers?"

"Yes, and fighting a war to bring her magic to victory."

"That may be so," Ermik said. Without asking Muhbaras's leave, he went over to the wine jug resting in a stone crock half-filled with cold water. The captain noticed that the spy's hands were not entirely steady as he poured himself another cup, still less so when he drank it off in one gulp.

"It is so," Muhbaras said. "And one rule which wise captains obey is never to take pleasures that you forbid your men. Do you think Khoraja will profit from a mutiny among the Maidens that leads to war in the valley and the ruin of all our plans to bedevil Turan?"

"No," Ermik said. "Nor will our native city profit from a scorned woman turning against us and all our plans. How long do you think we would live if the Lady of the Mists hurled her magic against us?"

Muhbaras said that he doubted that a man could measure so short an interval of time. Ermik nodded.

"Then the Lady should not feel scorned, even if this will make the Maidens jealous. Then, we need not fear so greatly. Nor need we fear them at all if the man goes to the Lady discreetly."

"That certainly means the man cannot be you," Muhbaras said. Then he shut his mouth with a snap of teeth as he realized that he had walked into a cleverly baited trap.

He forced laughter. "I see that I have talked myself into doing as the Lady wishes—which, of course, may be only to hear me sing tavern songs and juggle dried goat's ears—"

Ermik joined in the laughter. After the laughing ceased, Muhbaras poured them both more wine. That emptied the jug, but there was enough in his cup to soothe his dry throat, and all the wine in the world would not answer the one question that remained.

*How, in the name of every god who takes thought for such matters, does a common man go about scratching a sorceress with an itch?*

The sandstorm blew up during the night, and was still blowing the next day. The campsite had no well within its boundaries, as Khezal and Conan had chosen it for ease of defense. However, the well was so close that with a rope strung from the outermost sentry post to the well, water bearers could come and go safely even when the sand cut a man's vision to the length of his outstretched arm.

One Greencloak, a new man not yet desert-wise, still wandered away from the rope. Fortunately he had the wits to stop where night overtook him, and as he had been returning from the well with full water bags, did not suffer from thirst.

In the morning the man came in, scoured raw by the sand but not otherwise harmed, and Khezal ordered the camp broken. Sand was still drifting down from a haze-dimmed sky, and the horizon was barely visible at all, but the captain said that the next campsite had two wells and could be held against an army.

"Even one that does not reckon losses if they can bring down an enemy?" Conan said.

"You understand the tribesmen well, Conan—"

"I am a Cimmerian. Does that answer your question?"

"Not entirely. I was about to say that you do not understand them perfectly. No chief will throw away too many warriors. They might be driven to turn on him. Even if they remained loyal, if they were too few, his tribe or clan might fall to a more numerous enemy, or he himself might fall at the hands of a would-be chief with more followers. It is seldom that the tribesmen will fight to the last man, unless one gives them no choice.

"Of course," Khezal concluded with a wry grin, "this might be one of those times."

"I shall always remember you as a cheerful companion," Conan said.

"May we both live long enough to remember each other," Khezal said.

"We shan't, if you don't keep a better watch for snakes," Conan

snapped. He pointed at a desert asp wriggling toward the left forefoot of the captain's mount.

"I keep watch enough," Khezal said. In one moment his dagger was in his hand. In another, it was sunk deep in the sand, severing the asp just behind the hood. The body writhed furiously, but was still by the time the captain mounted.

They rode off, arrayed in the manner the Green-cloaks used when they feared a sandstorm. They rode close together, in double columns, with no man much farther than a spear's length from a comrade. Each man wore upon his clothes the whitest object he possessed, and there was a man with horn or drum for every ten riders.

The boy Conan had known in the Ilbars Mountains had become a man to follow. If Khezal's will could have kept him safe in the Turanian service, the Cimmerian might even have returned to it.

But the gods had willed otherwise, so Conan would ride west once more when this quest into the North was done.

## Eleven

That morning they were close to the stretch of desert the Girumgi called their own. (Or at least the one where wandering strangers were more likely to die at the hands of Girumgi than of any other tribe's warriors. That was as far as territorial claims commonly went in the desert, where a tribe that wished to could move almost as freely as a fleet of merchant vessels on the open sea.)

So in spite of their formation, the riders were keeping a better lookout for human enemies than for the weather. It was not a total surprise when the sandstorm blew up again, but it gave what would have been little enough notice even for the most vigilant men.

It did not help that only moments before the storm came upon them, they saw riders at the head of a val-ley not far off to their right. Thanks to some curious twist of the land, the air between them and the riders was as clear as a fine day in Vanaheim. It was possible to count the riders, some three score, and to recognize a Girumgi banner and headdresses among the nearer men.

Conan did not dispute the identification of the banner or the nearer riders, but his keen sight left him in doubt about the rest. He could not have said what tribe they were, but he was prepared to wager that they

would turn out to be other than Girumgi.

He was not prepared to wager the lives of his men, however. He took the lead when the sky and air both turned brown and the Turanians had to seek shelter before they could no longer see their hands before their faces. He rode down into the foot of the valley, then spread his Afghulis in a line across it. Still mounted, they watched the Turanians follow them out of the thickening storm and find refuge in a natural bowl on the north side of the valley.

"We'll watch above, you watch below," Khezal said, or rather shouted. The sandstorm now howled like a gale at sea, and hand signals would have been more sensible had anyone been able to see them.

"Fair enough," Conan shouted back. He did not add that he was personally going to slip up the valley and see whom they might be facing. It would be hard to punish him for disobeying an order that he had not received.

Conan waited until Turanians and Afghulis were in their intended places, and until the far end of the valley was as invisible as if it had been in Vendhya. The storm was less thick in the valley than on the open desert above, but Conan judged he could still slip close to these mysterious neighbors without being seen.

This quest had already sprouted too many mysteries. Here perhaps was one that he could solve before nightfall, risking no man's life but his own.

In this assumption he had not reckoned on Farad. When Conan slipped between the horses and gripped a rock to pull himself up and over, he found Farad sitting cross-legged atop the rock.

"You were near having your throat slit," Conan snapped. "Indeed, you may be still."

"Would that not be poor repayment for my loyalty?" the Afghuli said.

"Are you being loyal, or more like a louse in a man's breech-guard?"

"It seemed to us that you should not go scouting alone. Who would bring the truth, if you twisted an ankle or struck your head—"

"My head is not the one most likely to be struck here, my friend."

"—on a rock?" Farad went on, unperturbed and keeping his face totally blank. "So we rolled dice for the honor of going with you."

"Using your dice, of course?" Conan said. He could not help smiling, moved by Farad's evident determination.

"Of course. I am not one to leave *too* much to chance."

"Then let us be off. I could have subdued you if I needed to go alone. Both of us together cannot subdue Khezal and his Greencloaks if they learn of our plan."

Conan leaped off the far side of the rock, Farad followed him, and side by side they walked into the storm.

The storm above must have been scouring the desert and blinding or choking any traveler unfortunate enough to lack shelter. Before Conan and Farad had covered half the distance to the other band's outposts, they had to veil all of their faces but their eyes to breathe freely.

Conan had heard of tribes in Khitai who had the art of making masks of the bladders of certain fish, transparent yet strong enough to keep out the sandstorms of their deserts. The Cimmerian did not wish himself in Khitai—curiosity was joining his oath to Khezal and his men, to drive him onward along the trail of this quest—but he vowed that if ever he returned to Khitai, he would pay those tribesmen a visit.

Meanwhile, he was desert-wise enough to know how to study the ground about him without ever facing directly into the wind, and how to shield his eyes with his fingers when he had no choice. At least today there need be no fear of sun-dazzle!

The ground grew more rugged toward the end of the valley. Even without a sandstorm, a line of sentries would have needed to be close together to guard one another's flanks. As it was, the Girumgi sentries were a good spear-toss apart, and one at least seemed to have scant notion of a sentry's duties.

He wore a Girumgi headdress, two long daggers thrust into his belt, and a waist pouch. He also wore an expression of total disgust at being out here alone amid the blowing sand.

The man furthermore spent much of his time in the shelter of a rock, which prevented both sand from reaching him and his eyes from reaching much of anything. When he did stand in the open, he looked more toward his rear than his front. It was as if he expected enemies to leap from his own camp, not from the valley before him.

Conan was prepared to snatch another prisoner, but Farad saw the sentry's weaknesses as swiftly as the Cimmerian, and struck faster. Crouching low enough to be hidden behind a waist-high rock, Farad crawled to within arm's length of the sentry without being detected. Then the man heard or saw something amiss, his eyes widened—then they widened further as Farad's flung dagger sank into the man's bare throat.



Conan crouched beside the fallen man, as windblown sand covered the pool of blood. "I wanted to capture him silently."

"I was silent. More so than you were, reproaching me."

Conan forced himself to remember that free speech to a chief was one of the most sacred rights of the free Afghuli warrior. The man to fear was he who would not speak plainly to your face, as he was likely enough planning to thrust something sharper than words into your back.

"We must go forward, then. This time, *I* strike first."

"Of course, Conan. It is with stupid sentries as it is with willing women—there are usually enough to go around."

Conan and Farad slipped through the hole they'd made in the sentry line almost all the way to the main camp. Unfortunately, by the time they were close enough to recognize tribal colors, the storm was blowing so thickly that their sand-scoured eyes could barely tell rocks from huddled humans.

There were also too many of those huddled humans to make it safe to snatch a prisoner. Even the scrape of dagger on leather sheath might be enough to alert five of the prisoner's comrades and bring on a battle royal at the worst possible moment.

Nothing would come of that except their deaths, leaving the Afghulis without leadership. Conan did not trust even Khezal enough to believe his comrades would then escape harm.

They crept in a wide half-circle around the dead sentry. His rock shelter had almost vanished in the brown murk as the wind shifted and more of the storm blew into the valley. Conan thought he saw human figures moving around the rock, but could not be sure.

He hoped they were at least human if they were there at all. A sandstorm in unknown country was something to make a man believe in beings from the netherworld breaking loose and wandering about, seeking to work ill.

Not long afterwards, Conan knew there had been someone watching from the dead sentry's post—and that the watcher had seen him and Farad.

Someone was following them.

It was hard to be certain at first, and no one with eyes or ears less keen than the Cimmerian's could have learned of the pursuer at all. Even deeper within the valley, the sand and dust were swirling thicker, and the wind

howled like the mourning cries of demons.

But Conan's ears picked out the clang of steel on stone, the rattle of dislodged rocks, and once, the sound of breathing. Twice he went to ground and saw something moving, as the one behind failed to do the same in time to escape Conan's sharp eye.

At last Conan motioned to Farad, and whispered in the Afghuli's ear that their luck might be changing. They had snatched no prisoner from the enemy's ranks, but perhaps one might be about to crawl right into their arms.

"Your arms, I suppose," Farad said.

"One of us had best be free to run, if this goes amiss," Conan said.

"You need not whip a willing mule," Farad said sourly. "Good hunting, my chief." He crawled left as Conan slipped off to the right and went to ground.

Shrewdly Farad ceased to make much effort to conceal himself. This brought the pursuit in turn out of hiding—three robed men, none of them wearing any tribal markings Conan could recognize. The smallest of the three seemed to be the leader, although the others seemed ready to argue with their orders. At last all three seemed of one mind, and set off in a stalking pursuit of Farad.

This brought the leftmost man so close to Conan that he could have reached out and touched him. This was precisely what he did, with a fist descending like a club on the back of the man's neck. He jerked forward and his chin slammed into rock hard enough to stun him.

Conan quickly bound the man's hands with strips of his garments, then made sure that he was breathing. Two score paces of crawling brought him to the rear of the second man, the small one who led.

It also brought him into view of the third man on the right, just as a flurry of wind left clear air between them. The man's wordless cry gave the alarm, but he then made a fatal mistake by trying to roll over and unslung his bow.

That gave Conan time to close with the smallest man and seize him. The man struck at Conan with a dagger that seemed to be his sole weapon but was sharp enough to add to the Cimmerian's collection of wounds. He also kicked and screeched in a high-pitched voice that made Conan think he might have captured a eunuch or a youth.

None of this kept Conan from taking a firm grip on his captive. Farad, meanwhile, was disposing of the archer. The Afghuli was so determined on

a silent kill that he gave the man enough time to have raised the alarm. Fortunately the sight of Farad looming over him seemed to strike the man mute. He tried to change weapons from bow to tulwar, and in the middle of the change Farad's sandal sank into the pit of his stomach. Both weapons fell to the sand and the man fell on top of them.

Farad looked down at his victim. "Do we need him?"

"No," Conan said, as he finished binding and gagging his own captive. "I doubt you'll even be needing to bind him. It will be evening before he can draw a painless breath again."

Conan's captive was in better fettle. While he could neither speak nor struggle, so thoroughly was he gagged and bound, his large kohl-rimmed eyes glared eloquently.

"Game little cockerel, this one," Farad said, prodding the man in the ribs. "And look at the quality of the robe and the belt. A chief's son, I'd wager."

Conan was looking at the robe and the belt, but he was also looking at what seemed to be under them. He knelt and ran a hand across the captive's shoulders, then down across one shoulder blade to the chest.

"Ha!" the Cimmerian said. "You'd lose that wager."

"Eh?" Farad said, bemused at his chief's behavior.

"It's a chief's *daughter*."

"Eh," Farad said again, this time with an unmistakable leer.

Conan shook his head. "She's a good hostage as long as she's unharmed and not a moment longer. A hostage is worth ten women, where we are."

"Tell that to men who haven't seen a woman for months," Farad said. "I've little taste for fighting the Greencloaks over this one."

The woman did not seem to understand the Afghuli speech the two men were using, but the tones carried enough meaning. Her eyes were very wide, and her breath came quick.

Conan hoisted her over one massive shoulder and patted her lightly on the rump. "Don't worry, lass," he said, in Turanian. "You were game enough to earn a warrior's treatment besides being a good hostage. Anyone who comes to you will do it over my dead body."

"I stand by my chief with my blood and my steel."

Farad said. Although he spoke in Afghuli, the woman caught his tone and seemed to relax.

Then Conan stepped out, in a long ground-eating hillman's stride, with Farad guarding the rear. By the time they heard someone raising the alarm, they were nearly back to their own camp.

The name of the woman—barely that, for she admitted to no more than nineteen summers and looked younger—was Bethina. She was sister to Doiran, heir to the chieftainship of the Ekinari and blood-brother to the chief of the Girumgi. She was riding with a mixed band of Girumgi and Ekinari to bring safely home those Girumgi who had escaped the battle in the South.

All this she told willingly after they reached the camp—and after Conan and Farad saved her life.

They brought her in, unbound her feet, and removed her gag. Before they could do more, a man sprang from the dust, knife upraised to stab.

Conan replied with a foot upraised in the man's path. He stumbled over the tree-thick leg and went sprawling. Farad's foot came down on his wrist; he squealed and the knife fell from limp fingers.

Farad snatched up the dagger, freed the girl's hands, and gave her the blade. Conan nodded.

"Just be careful who you use it on, girl," he said. "I've not got so much blood that I can afford to lose it to friends."

She actually grinned, then held up the blade in a way that showed experience in fighting with steel.

She was just in time. A semicircle of Greencloaks had gathered around them. Conan and Farad shifted, so that they as well as the girl had their backs to a stout rock. Conan looked upward, saw more Greencloaks climbing atop the rock to attack from above, and decided that he would be leaving Turan with his honor intact but his hide somewhat otherwise.

"Hold!"

Khezal had a surprisingly robust voice for one of his modest stature and lean build. It rose above the cry of the wind and halted the Greencloaks above and below where they stood.

"Now, what is this brawling?" Khezal said, stepping forward.

He listened while both sides told their tale. At least he had not lost authority over his men. Conan had no illusions what would have happened otherwise.

"The Greencloaks do not harm another's prisoner," he said at last.

"Milgun, ask Captain Conan's pardon."

"Captain—?" the man practically spat.

"Milgun," Khezal said. He did not need to say more, let alone draw steel. His eyes finished the work of his voice.

Milgun made a clumsy obeisance. "Your pardon, Conan," he said.

"Now, Conan," Khezal said. "Milgun lost a brother to the Girumgi last year. Anyone who rides with them is no friend to him."

"I—not enemy to Greencloaks," Bethina said haltingly.

"Your brother rides with the Girumgi and you (obscenity) your brother!" someone shouted.

The fragile peace nearly dissolved then and there. Bethina bared her teeth, reminding Conan of a Cim-merian wildcat defending her cubs. Conan was sorry if it embarrassed Khezal, but he was resolved to feed steel to the next man who shouted.

All saw that resolve on the Cimmerian's grim countenance and held their peace.

"Bethina," Khezal said, in a tribal dialect that Conan barely understood. "You say you are not an enemy to the Greencloaks. Yet your brother does ride with the Girumgi, who have certainly shed our blood, and not long since.

"Tell us more."

"I—have not—not the right words," Bethina stammered.

"I will put your words into the speech of my people," Khezal said.

"And I will have the first man who brawls," Conan said.

The silence of the camp was broken only by the wind, until Bethina began to speak.

## Twelve

Bethina's brother Doiran was deeper in intrigues than had been suspected, or so it seemed from her story. He had at first sworn blood-brotherhood to the chief of the Girumgi to assure his succession among the Ekinari, if his father died prematurely.

Old Irigas did not die prematurely. Indeed, he had not yet died at all. But he was all but bedridden, and seldom spoke of anything save

long-dead wives and long-ago battles.

"He will die in peace," Bethina said through Khezal, "but his legacy to his people is a son who will lead them to war."

The Girumgi were always ready to try conclusions with Turan, and listening to their hotheaded younger warriors had done no good work on Doiran's judgment. However, he was too shrewd to trust only to one set of allies.

Khoraja had a long rivalry with Turan, if the fox could be said to have a rivalry with the elephant. Any time in the last century, if Turan had wished to turn Khoraja into a satrapy or even a desert, it could have done so. The price would have been great, in blood and treasure and also in new enemies for Turan, but it could have been done.

The ironhanded young Yezdigerd seemed more likely than his sire to attempt the overthrow of Khoraja, so the Khorajans were looking to their defenses. They were intriguing with the desert tribes, and they had found ready ears (and open palms) among Doiran and his followers in the ranks of the Ekinari.

It was then that Bethina spoke for herself.

"Many Ekinari—friends to Turan. Or not friends— honest men. Think Khoraja—use us like—like toys. I, Bethina—for these I speak."

No one seemed ready to believe that any desert tribesmen could be true friends to anyone, let alone Turan. But it was possible to believe that they did not care to be cat's paws for Khoraja. The shrewdness, if not the honesty, of the tribesmen had been a proverb in Turan for nearly as long as the empire had borne that name.

"The tribesmen aren't fools," Milgun admitted. "The Ekinari least of all. Lady, maybe I did not think."

As Milgun was widely believed incapable of chewing nuts and walking at the same time, this drew laughter. But it was the healthy kind, and presently the men dispersed, to look to their mounts and gear, so as to be ready to ride out when the storm abated.

At last Bethina, Farad, Khezal, and Conan were alone. Khezal kept looking back down the valley, as if expecting a solid wall of furious warriors to sprout from the sand at any moment.

"Best we be ready to fight or flee, if the lady's friends come for her," he said.

"Oh, I do not think that will happen, or at least not soon enough to

fear," Bethina said. Suddenly she spoke flawless Turanian, with the tones of a noblewoman.

The three men looked at the woman as if she had just grown a long purple tail. Then they looked at one another.

Bethina laughed. "In truth, the men with me—and I am grateful that they were not slain—were there to help me be taken captive. When they are found, they will show where I fell down into a crevice. I will be thought dead, at least for long enough that we may ride north safely."

Conan nodded. It seemed the politest thing to do. It also occurred to him that Bethina's allegiance was even more of a gift than it had seemed. If he remembered correctly, the Ekinari's lands were well to the north—toward the Kezankian Mountains, if not actually bordering on their foothills.

They might know more than most about the mysteries of those mountains.

Bethina nodded graciously, as the heiress of some great house might have nodded to three upper servants. "I look forward to riding with you gentlemen, for I see in you wisdom and strength."

Then she vanished into the murk, so swiftly and silently that for a moment Conan wondered if she was a spirit. But then he saw footprints, even now filling with windblown sand, and heard laughter like the tinkling of temple bells from behind a rock.

The three men looked at one another again, and all spoke a single word, each in his native tongue.

*"Women!"*

They rode out as soon as the sandstorm died enough to allow traveling, but before there was too little wind to cover their tracks and too little sand in the air to hide them. They put several hours of desert between them and the Girumgi, then found a patch of rough, scrub-grown ground and went to earth like so many foxes.

As daylight drained from the sky and a spangling of stars took its place, they mounted and were once more on the move.

Riding by night and resting up by day, it took them five days to reach Ekinari lands. Or at least these were lands where one was more likely to encounter riders of the Ekinari than those of any other tribe.

The Ekinari were hardly a peaceful people—in the desert as in

Afghulistan, no lover of peace at any price lived long enough to breed sons. But as Bethina pointed out, they had more good wells and safe places for their women and children than many tribes.

"Our warriors do not need to ride across every patch of ground and cleanse it of enemies, that the tribe may live," Bethina said. "We can look beyond today's blood-feuds. That is why Doiran will not prevail in the end."

"That might be so, if he stood or fell by what the Ekinari will do for him," Conan pointed out. "With the warriors and the gold of the Girumgi behind him, he will think that he can do as he pleases. He may even be right."

"That is not the brother I knew," Bethina replied. "You are saying that he is ready to make slaves of his own people, if he can be their master under the Girumgi?"

"Good men have done worse things when ambition fuddles their wits," Conan said sharply. "Besides, it's not hard to find tribesmen to follow you if you say you seek to hurt Turan. Turan has not been just in its dealings with the desert folk, and they have long memories for grievances."

Bethina gave Conan a radiant smile, and Khezal gave him a sour look. Farad carefully looked at the desert, but the Cimmerian could see a smile curving the man's lips under his beard.

Under the stars, they rode toward the Kezankian Mountains.

The Kezankian Mountains did not tower as high as the Ibars range in Turan, let alone the Himelias in northern Vendhya. *Those* were mountains that seemed fit to hold up the very sky, or pierce it and thrust their snow-clad peaks into the abyss beyond.

However, from the direction Conan and his companions approached them, the Kezankians leaped almost straight from the desert. Eagles nesting halfway up the mountain faces looked as tiny as doves, even to the Cimmerian's keen eyes. Birds flying any higher were as invisible as if they had been mag-icked.

Meanwhile, the desert wind itself grew cooler, and its flutings and pipings around the rocks set more than one man's teeth on edge.

"It's as if the wind itself knows this is a place to avoid," Farad said.

"Ha," Conan said. "I thought you would be feeling more at home than you have since we—"



"Fled Afghulistan?" Farad said. His grin showed all his teeth, but there was no mirth in his black eyes. Then he shook his head.

"I know what my homeland's mountains may hold—"

"Bandits, sheep, and lice," Bethina said. Farad stared at her, then laughed loud enough to raise echoes.

"Not so wrong, lady," Farad said. "But even the lice are—I won't call them *friends*, but at least no strangers to a man. Everyone is a stranger to these mountains, and they look like the sort who treat any stranger as an enemy."

Looking up at the gray walls before them and listening once more to the wind, Conan could not find it in his heart to disagree.

They found the remains of the camp the next morning, soon after they themselves had made camp for the day. Out hunting with Farad, Conan was the first to see the patch of soot in the middle of the trampled ground.

While Farad kept watch, the Cimmerian squatted by the trampled ground and studied it. He sifted soil between his fingers, sniffed the ashes, and finally rose.

"You look like a hound seeking a scent," Farad said.

"Close enough," the Cimmerian replied. "Now let's be finding their midden-pit. I'd wager this camp held at least forty men, tribesmen and others. Something they left in the pit has to tell us more about who they are."

"If we can find it and dig it up," Farad said.

"Oh, I think we can find it. As for digging it up, I'll do it myself if there's no other way."

"I can spare you that, my chief."

As it happened, Khezal's orders spared both Conan and Farad the dirty chore. A gang of Greencloaks set briskly to work with knives, hands, and the odd spade. (Cavalry were not much for building field-works or carrying digging tools with them.) The rubbish they unearthed told Khezal and Conan much the same.

"Two score bandits—what the tribes call loose-feet," Khezal said. "They're commonly a desperate, vicious lot."

"Then who left this?" Conan said, holding up a blackened square of metal.

"A Khorajan left his cloak pin," Khezal said. "In truth, a Khorajan captain, or at least a man of rank. That's silver with a relief of the king, as far as I can judge under the soot."

"Are you sure serving Mishrak never tempted you?" Conan chaffed the Turanian. "You have a good nose for spy's work."

"Also a tender conscience about it," Khezal said. He lowered his voice. "More so since Yezdigerd's accession, and I'd wager I'm not the only one."

Conan had no doubt of that. There were as many honest folk in Turan as anywhere, and more than in some lands he had traveled (and mostly departed as swiftly as he'd come). But as long as Yezdigerd's promise of empire dazzled their eyes with glory and filled their hands with gold, many Turanians might be less honest than they would be otherwise.

Turan might profit from his quest with Khezal, but the Cimmerian intended to end it far from Turan with the jewels at his belt, bound once again for Koth.

"Best we mount a good guard," Khezal said. "Forty loosefeet with a civilized captain leading them might do some mischief if they surprised us."

Conan nodded. "Perhaps. But we might do them more, if we surprised *them*."

Khezal frowned. Conan gave a gusty laugh.

"You Turanians still think like the plains horsemen who were your ancestors. You should never go to war without a hillman or few along, to tell you what to do when the land's at a slant."

Khezal threw the Cimmerian a weary look. "Very well, my friend. You speak and I will listen. But by all the gods, for every needless word you say, I will take one jewel from that bag before I return it to you. Talk me deaf, and you will ride empty-pursed for Koth."

"Better empty-pursed than empty-headed," Conan riposted. He drew his dagger and began to trace lines in the sand with the point.

Conan shifted his weight cautiously, lest a dislodged stone roll far enough to make a sound. The desert night was still, the wind for once asleep like everything else.

Or rather, as the bandits would expect everything else to be.

The trap Conan had proposed was simple. The main band would camp in the very shadow of the cliffs, choosing a place where no one could strike

from above unless they rode on the back of an eagle. They would be loud and lax in keeping watch, as if they thought themselves safe in their barracks. Anyone watching as the light faded would see easy prey, with hardly a sentry about, and none of those sober.

After dark, the revelry would continue, for all that Khezal swore to geld anyone who actually let a drop of wine touch his lips. Meanwhile, bands of men chosen for their handiness with steel and their keen night-sight would creep unseen out into the sand, at three points covering the three approaches to the main body.

Anyone who yielded to the thought of murdering and looting unsuspecting and incapable victims would face the rudest of surprises. Indeed, a man could die from such a surprise.

A small hand touched the Cimmerian's shoulder. He did not move, but his heart leapt within him. Perhaps the thought about dying of surprise had been ill omened.

He did not strike, however, because in the next moment the hand was laid gently across his mouth. He felt slender but strong fingers across his lips, and smelled healthy woman and the faintest of perfumes.

Conan shifted position again. His eyes were now accustomed to the dark, and he had no difficulty recognizing Bethina. What gave him difficulty was her reason for being out here with the ambush posts, and he could hardly ask her now, not when the slightest whisper might warn lurking foes.

She solved the problem for both of them by sliding into his arms, until her head rested on his shoulder and her lips were against his ear. They were more than agreeable lips to feel, fluttering softly on his skin as she explained.

"The men are taking their part too seriously. They do nothing but sing one lewd song after another."

Conan grunted, and shifted a third time, so that he could reply to Bethina as she had spoken to him. Her ear also felt more than pleasant against his lips.

"You're no garden rose, to wilt at a few rough words. Tell me the truth."

She was silent briefly, then replied:

"I see you know women."

"If I didn't at my age, I'd be a fool or bleaching bones."

"Perhaps. But—under law, I can be chief over the Ekinari, instead of

Doiran. Under law, if I do as a man does."

"And how do men among the Ekinari?"

"They must—they must be whole men, not eunuchs. Also, they must have taken a foe in battle."

The promise in the first words made Conan's blood race. The danger in the second silenced it at once.

"This is no game, Bethina."

"The bandits are no friend to Ekinari or any other tribe. The Khorajans still less so. I did not come here for sport, Conan."

The Cimmerian fought back laughter. "There are sports and sports, lady. But I agree, a dark ditch waiting for flea-ridden bandits is no place for most of them." He squeezed an admirably firm and rounded shoulder. "You'll find me as apt as—"

The Cimmerian broke off abruptly. In a lull in the songs from camp, a less convivial sound had reached his ears. It might have been the wind rising again; it might also have been the hiss of sand sliding under an incautious footfall.

The wisest thing was to wait for the intruder's next mistake. Bethina stiffened but made no sound, save the faintest rustle as she drew steel from under her robes.

The sound came again. This time it was unmistakably a footfall. A moment later a pebble rattled, the sound lasting until Conan could judge the direction. The intruder was close to the left. Too close to be left alone.

All very well, but he had no wish to spring the trap for a single man. "We want to draw them in, put an end to most of them, and learn from the rest," he remembered Khezal telling the men.

Again Conan moved, with the caution of a snake approaching a bird. He saw a darker patch against the sky, man-shaped and hardly a spear's length away. The man wore a bandit's ragged robes and was as hairy and bearded as one, but he wore a sword and dagger with silver hilts.

*Too vain of his blades to blacken them for night work*, the Cimmerian thought. The ranks of warriors would not miss this one.

The man turned at the last moment, so saw his death coming in the shape of a gigantic dark form leaping apparently from the ground. Then a fist like a maul exploded in his stomach and an arm like a giant snake locked around his neck. The man's senses had left him before his assailant had laid him on the ground.

Conan crouched in turn, stripping off the man's robes. A wide-eyed Bethina pulled the senseless man into the ditch and began binding his hands and feet with strips of his own garments, as Conan took his victim's place. He had to stoop a trifle to look the same size, although the man had been well grown. He had also worn under his robes more than enough to say "Khoraja" to anyone who knew the handiwork of that city's artisans.

The Cimmerian reached down and stroked Bethina's forehead, all he could reach without dropping his guard. He thought he heard a light, nearly stifled giggle, and vowed to touch more than her forehead as soon as they found a time and place. The lass had heart and wits to go with her looks!

In the Khorajan's place, Conan had a clear view all around him, to the horizon in three directions and the cliff in the fourth. The fires in the camp were dying down; no need to burn scarce dung to keep up the act. The stars no longer glowed undimmed; a haze was creeping across the sky. Another sandstorm? Conan hoped not, for he had small taste for another blind groping against a far deadlier foe than Bethina's "guards."

The sound this time was many footfalls, men trying so hard to be silent that they would have succeeded against almost any man but the Cimmerian. He counted more than twenty dark-robed and hooded figures with either bows or swords. Then farther off he heard a horse whicker.

The bandits themselves had divided their forces. Some would no doubt rush in to surprise the camp and sow panic. Then their mounted comrades would ride in to finish the work, driving off the Turanians' horses and carrying away loot and prisoners. The surviving Greencloaks would have small chance of pursuing, or even of living through another encounter with the meanest foe.

It did not take a warrior of Conan's experience to doubt that the bandits had devised this scheme by themselves. A shrewder captain than the bandits of any land usually produced was behind tonight's work.

The silence from the camp ran on. Conan cursed in several tongues. Before, he would have given much to send a silent message to the camp for quiet so he could hear the enemy approaching. Now he would have as gladly sent a message to them to sing and dance, so the bandits would not suspect that they had been detected.

Another whicker, closer, and Conan turned only his head in the direction of the horse-sounds. The mounted bandits were approaching through a dry wash that they thought concealed them completely. But a low part of the bank let Conan's eyes pick them out of the darkness.

Before darkness, the Cimmerian had ridden over much of the country for several bowshots around the camp. If his memory served him as to the ground in the enemy's path, there was a narrow end to the dry wash, where a handful might block many. A pity not to be able to do the work himself, but being where you were not expected in a night battle was the easiest way known to gods or men to be killed by your friends.

Conan now turned his head the other way, and this time the curses escaped his lips. Another band of loosefeet had drifted into sight as silently as a moving sand dune. They were marching straight for the mouth of the draw. No barring that to the horsemen now, not even by a Cimmerian's sword.

A very longheaded captain, the one who led the enemy tonight. Conan would gladly enroll him among the chiefs he had slain and sing a death song for him. He would still more gladly ask him what he did in this land, and who else aided him.

With his hands, Conan signaled to the six Afghulis at his post. The plan had been for all three outposts to strike the enemy in the rear. But the men in posts closer to the cliff now could not move that fast without being seen or heard and caught on open ground by bandit archers. In that situation, they were to rally on the camp itself and swell the ranks of its defenders—or face the wrath of both Khezal and Conan together.

The attack from the rear would now rest on broad Cimmerian shoulders—although six Afghulis accustomed to bladework in the dark were no despicable foe either. Together, Conan expected that he and the Afghulis might even be able to keep Bethina alive, although the harder she tried to "take her man," the harder that task would be.

Conan's chivalry toward women never let him keep one out of a fight she entered of her own free will. But the Ekinari would not be grateful if he led Bethina into battle and did not lead her out again safely. Ungrateful Ekinari could be a menace to the quest or the peace of Turan, and either way a menace to Khezal's future.

A man did not need to deal with moneylenders, Conan thought, to learn that he could owe too much to too many different people!

The Afghulis slipped along behind Conan as silently as the Cimmerian, more so than their enemies. Bethina not only kept up, she made hardly more noise than her companions.

So it was not any of those with Conan who alerted the prowling loosefeet to their danger.

"Eeeenaaaa—ha!"

The war cry split the night. Conan saw shadows swirl and dance as some bandits faced about, to repel attack from their rear. Others dashed forward, hoping to reach the camp in time to find the sleepy or the drunken struggling out of their blankets.

With battle joined, speed was now more important than silence. Conan broke into a run, slowing his pace only enough to not outdistance his companions too much. Being a match for any three warriors was no reason to go into battle alone when there was no need.

So Conan struck the bandits only a few paces ahead of Farad, and Farad only a few paces ahead of the other Afghulis. Bethina brought up the rear, but just before Conan drew his sword he heard her shriek.

"Leave one for me, Conan!"

Conan cursed and laughed in the same breath. He needed no advice, and Bethina had revealed her presence to the enemy. He would be glad to leave her a live foe or two, but he wondered if her enthusiasm for blooding her steel would survive her first battle. Knowing that you held men's lives on the edge of your sword sobered most warriors, and those it did not sober were as mad dogs, and the faster they were killed, the better for honorable men.

The ground dropped from under Conan's feet. He turned a stumble into a somersault and came up with gravel in his hair, sand in his mouth, and his sword still in his hand. He also came up so close to his first opponent that he barely had time to parry the first stroke of the man's tulwar.

Conan's riposte disarmed the man, and as he drew back to make way for better-armed comrades, the Cimmerian let him go. He was fighting against four or five, as far as he could tell. He would not borrow trouble unless his foes knew no more of swordsmanship than children. The children, that is, of other lands than Cimmeria.

Conan cut down two men without ever seeing them clearly, or so he judged from the way his slashes jarred his arm and the men he slashed screamed. A third proved that he was no child by getting in under the Cimmerian's guard with a long dagger. Conan buffeted the man with his fist, and as he reeled, brought his knee up under the man's jaw. Jaw and neck both sundered by the blow, the man fell lifeless.

By now the ground about the Cimmerian was slippery with blood and cluttered with the dead or the dying. Fortunately he could give way, because now the Afghulis were up on either flank, and he could hear their

steel meeting the bandits' even as he kept his eyes firmly on his own part of the battle.

So he did not see Bethina running up until she had run past him, into the midst of the enemy. How she escaped being skewered by mistake was a mystery that only the gods of battlefields knew, and Conan doubted that they ever bothered to share their knowledge with honest warriors.

He could not doubt that Bethina was in mortal danger, or would be the moment the enemy realized she was among them.

Cimmerian speed and strength saved Bethina, along with the slow wits of her enemies and her own well-wielded blade. She was admirably free of quaint notions about fair play in a desperate fight; she took her first man by stabbing him in the back. His scream warned comrades, but his life was already fleeing as Bethina snatched her dagger free and faced new foes.

One of these seemed so unmanned by facing a woman that Conan hardly needed steel to end his fighting. A swift kick sent the man down with a shattered knee, and Conan's other foot stamping on his arm sent his tulwar flying.

Bethina's next opponent was made of sterner stuff. He had only a dagger, but was supple and swift as a cat. He locked blades with the Ekinari girl, then gripped her by the hair. She gasped at the pain and tried to bring her knee up. This threw her off balance, and both opponents fell, the bandit on top.

Still Bethina fought without crying out or giving up, if not with great skill. Slowly the bandit's greater strength and weight threatened to prevail, as he forced her knife back against her breast and the point of his own closer to her flesh.

The bandit had at most a heartbeat to savor his coming triumph before death took him. Conan's fingers gripped his hair and yanked him upright, and the Cimmerian's sword slashed in a deadly arc, severing his spine and nearly cutting through his rib cage from the rear.

Bethina sprang to her feet, pale where she was not covered with her late foe's blood. "Your kill," she said, nodding to Conan. Her eyes were unnaturally wide and her lips parted, although her voice was remarkably steady for so newly fledged a warrior. To the Cimmerian, they seemed fuller than before, and even more inviting, not that he had found fault with them earlier—

"Look out!" Bethina screamed.



Conan moved, as it seemed to the man approaching him from behind, in three directions at once. Then his sword came out of nowhere and caught the attacker across the throat. The man's head lolled, nearly severed from his neck, but he remained on his feet long enough to block the passage of a comrade.

That gave Bethina time to prepare herself. As Conan's victim fell and his comrade worked around the Cimmerian's flank, Bethina struck. She sprang forward from a low crouch, driving her knife up under the man's throat. He was wearing a boiled-leather neck-guard, but instead of warding off or catching Bethina's blade, it deflected it upward.

The dagger's point ripped into the man's throat. It did not quite reach his brain, the blade not being long enough nor Bethina's arm strong enough to thrust it that far. But it killed the man quite as effectively as ever Conan's own blade could have done.

"*That* one is yours," Conan said. "I will stand witness, before gods and men."

For a moment he thought she was going to kiss or even embrace him, either course a sad folly on a battlefield that would have lowered his opinion of her wits. She held herself back, however, and then the swirl of battle was around them again. They had to stand back to back and defend themselves for a good while, a bad position for kissing even if one had no other work at hand.

Between them, Conan, Bethina, and the Afghulis put down or drove off most of the bandits. The few survivors who did not flee kept their distance. One had a bow and no fear of hitting friends; his arrows hissed randomly down about Conan and Bethina.

"Best get down, girl."

"I am no girl, and that archer could not hit a camel that was inside his own tent."

"Maybe, but worse archers have killed good men." The Cimmerian lifted Bethina with his hands under each arm, and dropped her into a ditch.

"Farad?"

"Here, my chief."

"Keep this *lady* company for a while. Sit on her if you must."

"If you do, Farad, no woman will ever give you pleasure."

"My heart breaks."

"I was not thinking of your heart, Farad."

Bidding the remaining Afghulis to remain where they were, Conan loped off into the darkness. He was going against his own war-wisdom, but something perturbed him. The horsemen had not ridden down on the camp, although he could still hear their mounts not far off.

Nor was the third force of bandits either engaged or in sight. They might have sunk into the earth or grown wings and flown off to the stars, for all the Cimmerian could see of them. He disliked leaving his Afghulis, but knew that no man among the Turanian ranks was more adept at night scouting than he was. If anyone could unearth the answer to yet *another* mystery, it was the Cimmerian.

The Cimmerian also nearly paid with his life twice over for the answers he found. The first time was when he rounded the shoulder of a low sand dune and came hard upon a band of tribesmen lying in wait. They had been so silent that even his ears did not pick their breathing out of the desert night, he so cat-footed that their ears seeking other sounds gave no warning.

Four arrows flew almost in a single breath, and it was the favor of the gods (not to mention the Cimmerian's own lightning-quick fall and roll) that kept any of them from doing him serious hurt. He rolled to within arm's reach of the nearest tribesman, plucked him from his hiding place like a boy picking a pear from a tree, and drew the man in front of him as a shield.

"Hold," he whispered. "Who do you follow?"

"Bethina," someone said, immediately hushed by several others. Then a voice that was, incredibly, that of an aged woman, said:

"Stand up, that I may see you."

Conan made a rude suggestion about what the old woman could do with that idea. He heard a soft laugh—a laugh, not a cackle, which might have come from a woman hardly older than Bethina.

"No. By Crom, Mitra, and all lawful gods, I will curse any who harm you without my leave."

It struck Conan that if the old woman, whom he had no cause to trust, did give leave, he would be dead before he fell to the ground. Those archers would not miss again.

But these people were not behaving like blood enemies. If they were not, there was small cause to reveal them. Also, he had now seen the headdress of the man he was using as a shield. It was too dark to make out colors, but the pattern of the headdress was the same as Bethina's.

Conan stood up, without releasing his prisoner.

"Let Gorok go." The old woman spoke like someone accustomed to command. Bethina's mother? A tribal sorceress? Whatever she might be, Conan decided it was something to be obeyed—although he drew both sword and dagger before he freed Gorok.

"Yes-s-s-s-s." The old woman's one hissed word reminded Conan unpleasantly of sounds heard in the temples of Set the Great Serpent, when it was time to feed the sacred snakes.

Conan vowed that if the woman turned into a snake now, it would be her last act in this world.

Instead the old woman laughed softly again. "Fools! This is he who saved Bethina! I saw it, and do any of you deny that I have true vision?"

No one did. The old woman indeed sounded like some ancient village crone of Cimmeria, women honored and more than a Utile feared even when they were in their right senses.

"I am a friend to Bethina," Conan said, choosing his words carefully. "If you are kin or friends to her, then I can hardly be your ene—"

"Hsssst!" someone said. Conan recognized, the universal call for silence and alertness, and went to a crouch. As he did, he understood why the riders had not yet charged in. They were either comrades to these men, and therefore friends, or they had seen these men and were maneuvering against them.

Which was yet another mystery, in a journey that had already produced far more than an honest warrior could contemplate with any peace of mind. Conan knew of no god who could truly and reliably be bribed with sacrifices. If he had, he would gladly have promised such a god almost anything imaginable for no more than that this journey should hold *no more mysteries*.

Perhaps some god did hear part of the Cimmerian's unvoiced wish. Certainly this particular mystery died almost at the moment of its birth. Perhaps the bandit riders had overheard Conan's meeting with those who waited. Perhaps their own comrades signaled for help. Perhaps some underchief among them simply grew tired of waiting.

Regardless, the rattle of hooves on stones cut off the Cimmerian's words. He leapt for higher ground and saw the others also moving. Only the old woman was not running, and she was walking briskly enough for one of the age her voice revealed.

Unless it was her laugh that told the truth, and in such case, was she a

witch?

Likely enough, the voice of experience whispered to Conan. It also told the Cimmerian that few magic-wielders ever served any cause but their own. Finally, it told him that if this woman was truly Bethina's friend, then her cause and Conan's might march together.

That was all the listening to voices Conan had time for, before the loosefoot riders came down upon him and his newfound comrades.

Four or five of them rode a little behind and to one side of their comrades. Conan's path also separated him a trifle from his. So the mounted bandits found themselves riding at a single man on foot, and let out shrill cries of triumph at sighting this easy prey.

They were more mistaken than they could know in their remaining moments of life. They were contending against more than his strength, speed, and war-wisdom. They were contending against a man who had been a seasoned warrior before he ever bestrode a horse. Moreover, he was a son of Cimmeria, a land that had never spawned a mounted army but had devoured more than a few. What Conan did not know about how a man on foot might best those on horseback was hardly knowable by mortal man.

He threw sand in the face of one horse, then darted aside from it and under the slash of its rider's sword to hamstring the next horse from behind. He had to parry another down-cut with his own sword, but that slowed the rider enough to let a Cimmerian hand grip the man's near leg.

The rider came out of the saddle like the bung from an ale barrel, flew in an arc over Conan's head, and smashed down headfirst. No man could survive an impact that made such a sound of crushing skull and cracking spine.

The next rider flourished a lance, and squalled triumph as he saw the Cimmerian appear to stumble. The "stumble" was judged very exactly, to take the Cimmerian a finger's breadth clear of the lance point without taking him out of reach of the lancer.

The lancer discovered this as his horse suddenly staggered. It staggered from the weight of a Cimmerian leaping on its back. Then the rider screamed from the pain of a dagger thrusting into his vitals from behind, and fell with a thud as Conan flung him to the ground like a sack of grain.

In the confusion the last rider did not notice that his opponent had transformed himself from a helpless footman to sudden death and now to a mounted foe. Conan did not give the man time to repent of this error. He

saw that the man's horse had its rump toward him, and mischievously bent out of the saddle and jerked its tail.

The horse tried to rear and kick out at the same time. It failed to do either, and instead lost its balance and toppled. The rider found himself sliding inexorably backward out of his saddle, then suddenly suspended in the air by one stout Cimmerian arm.

The man stared into cold blue eyes from which Death itself seemed to look out. Then the harsh dark face that held those eyes split in gusty laughter. The man fainted with sheer relief and never felt himself strike the ground as Conan dropped him.

Then he was looking over the heads of his new comrades as they shot, pulled, or hacked the remaining mounted bandits out of the saddle, to see Bethina running across the sands. He raised his voice to shout, "Down!" and at the same time raised his sword.

It came down on the arm of a loosefoot archer drawing on Bethina, and arm, bow, and arrow all tumbled to the ground. The archer followed them a moment later, with a split skull.

Then Bethina ran lightly through the melee, dagger drawn but giving little heed to other possible dangers, and threw her arms around a small figure standing by an upthrust rock. Conan heard the figure complain, in the old woman's voice:

"Bethina! Spare my ribs, for the gods' love!"

The tone was that of an old nurse to a beloved child now grown to womanhood. Conan slipped out of the saddle and flexed his shoulders to ease tension.

Whoever the old woman's companions might be, they could hardly be enemies to any friend of Bethina, quite apart from the fight that they had made beside Conan against the loosefeet. There were still mysteries aplenty hovering about this quest, like vultures about a poisoned spring, but the answer to this one at least seemed free of danger.

## **Thirteen**

The summons that had to be from the Lady came to Muhbaras some days later.

The summons itself was no surprise. The chamber to which a Maiden led him was a considerable one.

It was hung with moldering tapestries, and the bare rock floor was piled with rank furs and roughly cured hides. A low table was the only furnishing, bearing cheap brass plates and bowls filled with biscuits and fruit and lightly covered with coarse cloth. A jug of wine shared the table, as well as two cups.

Muhbaras had time to cease to be surprised before the door closed behind him. His next thought was that on this cold floor, bedding the Lady, who was fair but a trifle thin-flanked, might not give her much pleasure. His next thought was that he would give three fingers for a drink, but knew not what might be in the wine.

Instead he sat down, rolled up a fur to pad his back, and leaned back against the wall. Again he chose a position where he could see the whole room—so he leapt nearly to the ceiling when he heard a soft sigh behind him.

The sigh, as of a child exhaling, was followed by a low rumble. By now Muhbaras stood in the center of the room, cursing the floor coverings for tangling his feet when he wanted freedom to move swiftly. He had just started kicking a space clear when a section of wall pivoted on a central shaft, leaving blackness on either side.

Cool air with a faint scent of moss trickled out of the blackness. Then the blackness itself seemed to move, turning blue as it did. A luminous mist filled the gaps on either side of the stone panel, and in one of those gaps a white-limbed form took shape.

With fluid grace, as if she herself were a creation of mist, the Lady stepped forth into the chamber.

"How powerful do you think the old woman is?" Khezal asked.

Conan looked askance at the Turanian captain. "Omyela? And you're asking *me* about *her*?"

"You're a longheaded man, Conan my friend. Also longsighted. You may see farther than most into this old witch."

"I've learned only enough about sorcerers and their ilk to be able to defeat or avoid them. If you want real knowledge, send to Aghrapur."

"Aghrapur is a long ways off, my friend. You are here. Also, if half the stories about you are true, you've done more than fight free of the clutches of sorcerers. You've walked away leaving a good many of the breed dead behind you."

"I've done that with many who tried to keep a reluctant guest," Conan said.

"Nonetheless, you've doubtless learned more than you think you know."

"Very well. I trust Bethina, and she speaks well of Omyela. She also seems a shrewd old body to me. Whether she's fit to contend with the Lady of the Mists, I don't know. Nor will anyone else, until we all learn a trifle more about the Lady."

Conan finished his cup in a single swallow and belched in the manner of the desert tribesmen complimenting their host's hospitality. "As to how we shall do that—how goes the questioning of our captives?"

"Well enough, and I thank you for your care in providing us with Khorajan prisoners. Unfortunately one of them died before he talked, and the other told us only a little we did not already know."

"Such as what?"

"That only one Khorajan, a captain named Muhbaras, actually enters the Valley of the Mists. It is his company that escorts the captives to the gate. There are tales that the Lady looks upon him with more favor than she does most men."

"Good luck to Muhbaras, then. That's a fate I'd not wish on a priest of Set. Any more?"

Khezal shrugged. "Muhbaras may have twenty men, he may have a hundred. He may have a wizard of his own, he may only have a royal spy. Tales all, and each contradicting the last one."

"Somehow, I cannot cheer at this. But it's no worse than I expected. But we send scouts up to the mouth of the valley. Even if they don't come back, that itself will teach us more than we know. Also, they could ask the villagers who've been providing the victims what they know. A little promise of protection would loosen tongues, I'm sure."

"I'd favor that, but we can't split the men that way. A large enough scouting party, and we'd be helpless here below if the Girumgi appeared." Khezal shook his head. "No, I hate to appear in leading strings, but I think we need to call for reinforcements. Ten score more Greencloaks or even tribal levies, and we can send up to the valley enough men to do real work. Not just scout but fight."

"We'll have to tie Bethina up to keep her from biting people," Conan said, laughing. "She badly wants this mist menace driven away from her tribe's lands."

"Conan, from the way the young lady's been looking at you, I'm sure you can find a dozen other and more pleasurable ways of making her harmless."

The Cimmerian grinned. He did not tell Khezal that an order to spend time in Bethina's company was exactly what he'd been trying to gain.

There were opportunities beckoning that Khezal's plans might let slip. But to take advantage of them, Conan would need the Ekinari woman's help.

As he had not known when to expect his meeting with the Lady of the Mists, Muhbaras also had not known what she might be wearing. Considering how little she wore on many of the occasions he had met her, he would have been surprised by nothing.

The blue light playing about her concealed all but her face and hair until she was several paces into the room. Then the slab pivoted back, leaving only apparently blank wall behind the Lady.

Muhbaras could now see that she wore a long-sleeved gown that covered her from throat to ankles without concealing the grace and suppleness of the body under it. One could not make out details, but one was left in no doubt about the beauty of the woman standing there.

The Lady raised her hands, and her sleeves fell back to the elbows. She wore thin silver bracelets on either wrist, the one on the right wrist set with emeralds or some other like-colored stone, nearly as fine as sand grains.

Muhbaras could not help catching his breath at the gesture. Those raised hands could be the first step in a spell—

"Fair and noble captain, there is nothing to fear."

"Perhaps I have nothing to fear," Muhbaras said. "But what of you? Am I worthy to treat you as you deserve?"

The Lady bit her lip, and Muhbaras was astonished to see that she was holding back laughter. The Khorajan felt a sudden urge to step forward and take her in his arms while she laughed against his shoulder.

He reminded himself that laughter was part of being human, not all. The Lady might laugh like a girl, and still torment those about her like the maddest of despots grown old in vice and corruption. Both were in her. Both would be in his embrace. Muhbaras felt his temples throbbing.

"You are worthy," the Lady said softly. "You are worthy of a better



setting for our—" she hesitated and seemed to be flushing '—our meeting."

She carried no staff and wore no amulets or other magical devices that Muhbaras could see. All he saw was three passes of those long-fingered hands, exquisite fingers with nails the color of the desert sky at dawn, fingers that seemed very ready to be kissed—

Golden light flooded the chamber, dazzling Muhbaras for a moment. He felt heat on his face, then on his feet, then all around him. It faded, but did not entirely disappear.

"You may open your eyes," the Lady's voice came.

Muhbaras did. The walls and roof of the chamber were now a vaulting of fine blue tile. The floor was the finest of golden sand. In one corner—where the smelly furs had been piled—rose a pavilion, a crimson and blue silk canopy supported by four rosewood posts, each carved in the form of a different marvelous beast. Muhbaras thought he recognized a leopard, a serpent, an otter, and a dragon.

Under the canopy lay a pile of silk cushions, and beside the cushions a low table, plain ebony on ivory legs. Golden dishes of cakes and sweetmeats covered it, making a circle around a silver jug of wine.

On the cushions lay the Lady of the Mists. She wore nothing except her bracelets, and her hair flowing like silken threads over her bare shoulders and down across her breasts. All the beauties Muhbaras had expected were there for him to see—and now to touch.

He felt his blood race and realized that he, too, wore nothing. The first step toward the pavilion was as hard as if he wore iron boots, but the second was easier, the third easier still.

Before long, he was sitting beside the Lady. Her head was on his shoulder, and he was nibbling a honey cake that she held up to him. The last of the cake vanished, and he found himself licking her fingers.

"The honey tastes real," he said. "You taste real."

"It is. I am," she said. Her voice was unsteady. "All that is here, all that will come to us here, is real."

"It seems too beautiful."

"You doubt my beauty?" she said, sitting up so that he could see everything. He looked—and saw in her eyes what could only be fear.

Desire and tenderness swept through Muhbaras. Here was the Lady of the Mists, sorceress with mighty magic at her command and mistress of life and death over all the valley. Here also was a frightened maiden,

tasting desire for the first time, offering herself to a man that she might fulfill that desire— and finding that all her magic was no help whatever. If she had schemed for weeks to make Muhbaras ready to greet her as man to willing woman, she could not have found a better way.

Muhbaras closed the gap between them and lifted her fingers to his lips. He licked off the rest of the honey, then turned her hand over and kissed the palm of the hand. Presently his lips crept up past the brace-let, and it was not long after that before she opened her arms and all the rest of her to Muhbaras.

He thought that he had never heard a sweeter sound in his life, than the first time she cried out in delight.

It was almost enough to make him forget the cries of Danar in his last agony at the Lady's hands.

"Omyela will not be pleased at waiting," Bethina said. She was walking beside Conan, bow in hand and quiver over her back. They were together on pretense of going hunting, close enough to the camp not to be in danger, far enough that no unwanted ears might hear their talk.

"I was not thinking that she would have to," Conan replied. "If she is ready to ride out tonight—"

"You would go against Khezal?" Bethina asked.

Conan grinned. "Quick to see, aren't you?" he asked.

"I am not a green girl, and my father allowed me to sit in the council meetings of the tribe from my fourteenth year," Bethina said, with dignity.

"Pardon," Conan said. "I would go against Khezal if I had to. But I'm not sure that riding north is as much against his orders as he said."

"If it is not, he could be making a puppet of you," the woman said. "If you succeed, he can claim the glory. If you fail, he can say you disobeyed him, and your enemies in Turan will rejoice at your death."

"Khezal will have to change more than most men before he intrigues that way," Conan said. "The most I think is that he's trying to guard his back from *his* enemies in the Great City.

"But you're right. He may be trusted, but no doubt there are royal spies among the Greencloaks. I need my Afghulis, and they need to be out of Khezal's reach, so we need to find a path for them."

"Let me talk to Omyela," Bethina said. "Giving her a chance to trick a Turanian is better than offering her a sack of gold."

The Lady of the Mists was a clean maiden, but either magick or good fortune made her first union all pleasure and no pain. Or so it seemed to Muhbaras.

Of his own pleasure, he could not speak, for there were no words in any tongue he knew that would do it justice. Indeed, he wondered if there were words in any of the tongues of men.

Presently she conjured a pool of sparkling water into the middle of the chamber, and led Muhbaras to it. They bathed old passion from them, but kindled new, and soon were locked together on the sand at the edge of the pool.

"I am beginning to believe this is all real," Muhbaras said. He rested a hand on a part of the Lady of whose reality he had become wholly certain.

She imprisoned his hand with hers, then kissed his fingers. "It is all real. What I had put in the chamber was the stuff of earth, as is my magic. It is easier to transform what exists into something else, that to create something out of nothing."

It occurred to Muhbaras that the transformation might as easily go the other way. The Lady seemed to read his thoughts.

"No. You will be gone from here before the chamber is as it was. You need have no fear of waking up alone amid balding furs and reeking hides."

"Do I need to fear walking out of this chamber in the garb I wore at birth?"

"If I do not, why should you? We will not be cold." She proved her warmth all over again, and it was some while before Muhbaras could again think about clothes.

Again, it seemed that his thoughts were written upon his face. Suddenly he was garbed as he had been, although he thought his blades had been polished and sharpened since he last saw them.

"You see? All that I hold in my memory, I can restore as needed. But is soldier's garb needed now? I think not." She snapped her fingers, and Muhbaras was unclothed again.

The Lady grinned. "I am not done with you, nor I think you with me. Come to me, captain. If it was in me to beg, I would. But with you, I will never have to."

As Muhbaras took the Lady of the Mists in his arms again, he could not

help wishing that this might be true. The Lady might have come to him with blood on her hands that the gods themselves could not wash off. Yet he would not begrudge her what little happiness he might be able to give her.

## Fourteen

Old Omyela might be hardly larger than a ten-year-old Cimmerian girl, with a black-eyed gaze that neither Conan nor anyone else could meet for long. She was also as shrewd as any descendant of so many generations of hard-living desert folk could be, however, and she seemed to know her spells.

One of those spells covered the escape of Conan's new company—all the Afghulis and twenty-five Ekinari besides Bethina and Omyela, with a few spare mounts "acquired" from the Greencloaks. It was the simplest of spells, sending into the middle of the Greencloak camp an image of Bethina dancing. While everyone, including the sentries, had their eyes fixed on the play of supple limbs and veils that revealed more than they hid, the Afghulis slipped out of the camp.

Carrying their gear, they swiftly reached their meeting with the Ekinari, who had mounts for all. Then, mounted and with night enfolding the desert to hide their tracks, Conan's new band rode north.

They had a good notion of where to start looking for the Valley of the Mists, and it was a good three days' ride to the north. Conan set a punishing pace that made even the Afghulis sweat, and feared only that the two women might not be able to endure.

Neither gave trouble. Bethina was young and fit, and decades of desert sun had baked Omyela to the color and toughness of old leather.

"I remember when a woman who could not ride from dawn to dark three days running was not considered fit to bear children," Omyela said, scoffing at Bethina's concern. "Take care of yourself, girl. Wear away your strength, and when that Cimmerian wants you, there'll be nothing of you there!" She gave a bawdy chuckle, and Bethina's bronzed skin turned even darker.

Conan walked silently away, and nearly ran into Farad.

"Maidens should not ride on such death-quests," the Afghuli said softly.

Conan laughed. "Maidens you admire, you mean. I had not heard that the Afghuli lasses huddled around the cookfires."

"I admire that wild desert girl?" Farad said indignantly.

"Yes," Conan said. "Or was it someone else who stood there gaping while she danced, so that Omyela could send the image to the camp? A fly could have crawled into your mouth and made a nest in your back teeth, for all you noticed."

Farad twined the fingers of both hands in his beard and glared at Conan. "My chief, the day I cannot tell when a beautiful woman dances, it will be the day I am dead or at least blind. Last night I was neither."

Conan laughed, and chaffed Farad with a few light words to cool his indignation. He wondered if he should mention Farad's admiration to Bethina, lest the girl hurt him by chance.

Then he decided on silence. He faced enough tasks for three men on this last part of the journey, and he would not add playing matchmaker to them!

Captain Khezal was neither surprised nor alarmed at waking to find Conan gone, and the Afghulis and Ekinari along with him. He had, indeed, rather hoped that the Cimmerian would take swift action, and be long gone before any reinforcements to the Green-cloaks arrived from the South or West.

Such reinforcements were likely to include some captain more senior than Khezal. Not all such captains would be inclined to send Conan's head in a bag of salt back to Aghrapur, but too many were. Even those who wished to be honest might become otherwise, for fear of what spies might say. Fear of Yezdigerd's spies had run through Turan like a plague for years now, and showed no signs of abating.

Khezal might be putting his own head in danger, of course. But he would rather not keep it on his shoulders if he could not do so honorably. Conan was thrusting his head into a land of the most sinister sort of magic, courting damnation even more than death. For the sake of a friend facing such dangers, one's own death was nothing much to fear.

So Khezal sent messengers south and west, and also waited for the messengers returning from the party he had trailing Conan.

They rode close to the mountains, for concealment from the desert and for water from the mountain springs. It was as well that the Greencloaks did not ride with them, for no tribe in these lands was friendly to Turan. Instead, the wind seemed to bear word of their coming to tribesmen in

search of adventure, and these riders came in until Conan led a band of more than fifty.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, they camped at the mouth of a ravine known for its endlessly flowing springs. Farad led the first watch up the ravine, and Conan did the same with the second when Farad's men returned. Bethina went with Conan, striding with sturdy litheness over the rugged ground. She was clad from crown to toe, but the breeze pressed certain of her garments against the ripe curves Conan remembered so well from the night she danced.

They led the way up the ravine, and Conan's hill-eating stride soon left everyone but Bethina behind. They found themselves climbing onto a shelf of rock, from which the far end of the ravine rose straight into the sky, a vertical crack taller than a tall tree.

From the crack in the rock, water flowed, to form an iridescent blue pool just beyond the shelf. Below the shelf, water flowed out and down, to form the stream that the men were using to fill their water bags.

Conan saw that the rocks on either side of the pool sparkled with gemlike bright bits, and a soft cushion of blue lichen overgrew one of them. He wanted to sit down, pull off his boots, and bathe his feet in water that looked so much like the pools where he'd swum as a boy in Cimmeria.

Bethina had already given in to the same impulse. She dandled her feet in the water, wincing at its chill, then kicked and splashed like a baby.

Suddenly she stood up and began unlacing her cloak. "I think that pool's deep enough to swim in."

Conan frowned. "Mortally cold, though."

"Is hill blood so weak, then? Or are you so clean that you need no bath?" She wrinkled her nose. "No, it cannot be that. So it must be a weakness in Cimmerians. The world must know of this. I shall— yaaahh!"

She broke off with a happy shout as Conan closed the distance to her, lifted her, and tossed her into the pool. It was deep enough to submerge her completely; when she bobbed to the surface she was spluttering and gasping from the cold.

Then she laughed, dove again, and came up at Conan's feet. Water sluiced over him, and as Bethina thrashed and splashed, more doused him all the way up to his waist.

"Well, Conan?"

Conan glared in mock-fury, sat down, and started pulling off his boots.

Then he stopped, for Bethina's tunic was now floating in the pool, and as he watched, her trousers bobbed up to join it. Then her head reappeared, hair sleeked down over bare shoulders, and she stepped out of the water. Silver drops ran down between her breasts and over every other curve, and Conan's arms were rising to meet her even as she came into them.

They used the bed of lichen well, and for how long, Conan never knew. Even the thought of danger could not enter his mind for a while.

Somewhere in Bethina's embrace, he chuckled.

"Do I amuse you, Conan?"

"That, and much else. But I was thinking. You are a whole woman now, true?"

"Well—"

"You're lacking nothing any woman has, and you've more than most. Or isn't that what your folk call 'whole'?"

"For me—it might be best—if I bore a child. Prove that the line of my father is safe with me. To a man of good blood, of course, and a friend to the tribe."

Conan slapped Bethina smartly on her bare rump. "Woman, you won't find me unwilling, and I hope your folk call me friend. But having a babe in your belly is no way to go questing!"

"I will remember that. But surely, Conan, we will not be here in the mountains that long?"

"Maybe, maybe not. But if you hope too much, ten Turanian crowns to a brass bit you'll find yourself trying to have the babe somewhere in a blizzard-buried cave in the mountains next winter!"

She shuddered at the thought, and the Cimmerian held her close. He hoped she could not read in his touch his innermost thought, which was that anyone here by next winter would not be among the living. Perhaps not among the lawfully dead, if the Lady of the Mists had half the powers credited to her by rumor, but surely not among the living.

"More wine, my Lady?" Muhbaras said. He sat on the edge of the magical pool in their meeting chamber, legs dangling, holding out the jug.

The Lady of the Mists nodded, extending one bare white arm. She wore nothing, and Muhbaras no more. Now they did not disrobe by magic when she transformed the chamber, but disrobed each other, touching and caressing as they went.

"You would make a fine servant, Muhbaras," the Lady said, as the golden wine flowed into her cup. "Perhaps I should bind you to me so that you will be here forever."

Muhbaras could not keep his hands from tightening on the jug. It tilted, spilling a few drops of wine into the water. The Lady looked at the widening gold circle and laughed.

"Does that frighten you, Muhbaras?"

"Yes, my Lady. It does. I have lived all my life as my own man, free to decide for myself and for those placed under me. I would not willingly give it up."

He smiled. "Besides, my lady, I think you have found me skilled enough as a free man, not to wish to exchange me for a slave." He slipped into the water and swiftly embraced the Lady.

She struggled, or at least pretended to do so. But Muhbaras's lips were on hers, and even when she poured her wine over his head, he did not take them away. At last she went limp in his arms—then grappled him like a mating she-leopard with a great cry of triumph and delight.

Presently they lay in the pavilion, as a soft scented magical breeze dried their bare skins. The Lady shook her head. "I would never change you, Muh-baras. This I pledge, by—"

Muhbaras did not recognize the names of half the gods (if they were gods) that the Lady invoked. He was glad of this. The Lady had delved far too deep into ancient and forbidden knowledge that he had no wish to share.

"I also call them to witness that if I changed you, I would be sorry for it."

"Sorrow has not seemed part of you."

The Lady of the Mists turned her face away. With her head muffled in a pillow, she said, "I have not allowed sorrow near me in many years. Not since I came to womanhood and my powers at the same time."

Muhbaras did not have to wait long for the story. He heard it gasped out between barely muffled sobs. Long before it was done, he lay spoon-fashion with the Lady, her head against his chest, cradling her as he would have done a hurt child.

Horror seethed within him, at the tale. Revenge would have heated his blood, except that the men re-sponsible were all long dead. The Lady had taken that vengeance into her own hands, and done thorough work.



So how an Aquilonian noble's daughter came to be the Lady of the Mists was answered. What was not answered was another, far more urgent question (at least in Muhbaras's eyes).

How was a common man to endure long enough as consort to a sorceress, to heal her from her wounds and make her whole as both woman and witch?

Conan's band hugged the foot of the mountains for the next two days. Once more they rode by night to hide themselves from any human watchers who might be lurking either among the rocks or among the dunes.

"To be sure, the Lady's magic may have given her a clear sight of us since we fought the loosefeet," Omyela said cheerfully. "And if it has, she has doubtless prepared for us hospitality that we will not be able to refuse. But she may find me a more awkward guest than she anticipated when she sent the invitations."

The thought of being watched through magic was one of the few things in the world that could make the Cimmerian uneasy. However, he had gone on this quest knowing that there was magic at the end of it, and too many followed him to let the uneasiness show.

"I've been the same kind of guest to a good few witches and wizards," Conan said. "Spells against steel do not always go the way the spellcaster wants it, if the steel's in good hands."

"Just as long as you do not think *I* am one whom you can cut down before I can bespell you," Omyela said. She was smiling, but the smile did not reach her eyes, and Conan heard no warmth in her voice.

"You need not fear me even trying," he said evenly. "Not unless you give me cause."

They rode on in silence.

In the heart of the peak at the far end of the Valley of the Mists, there was discontent.

That is applying a term suited for living creatures, even intelligent ones, to something that was neither living nor dead, neither intelligent nor mindless. It merely *was*.

But it could feed, and when the essence of living beings was offered to it, it did so in a way that might be called eager. Feeding had become a habit,

and it had gained the notion that this would continue if it obeyed certain commands that seemed to come at regular intervals.

Now the commands no longer came as often. Nor did the feedings. The discontent grew.

There also grew what might be called an idea. If the life essences no longer came to the entity, could it not go to them?

The problem was *where*.

It began to seem that the commands had come from a particular place. It gave cause for the entity to wonder.

If it found the place where the commands had come from, would it then be able to feed?

At least this gave some direction to the search— and the entity below the mountain had begun to be able to distinguish what had direction from what did not.

The Lady of the Mists had labored and sacrificed for years to bring the Mist to this point, but when the Mist finally reached it, she did not know until it was much too late.

## **Fifteen**

The mountains lunged skyward and dawn was tinting the distant snowcaps as Conan reined in. His sense for danger told him that they should ride on, and not make camp here. His other senses told him that the danger was being seen if they rode on in daylight.

He dismounted and studied the ground, seeking a sign of hostile presence to justify his unease. The ground was too hard in most places to show tracks, and during the night the wind had blown hard, with nearly a sandstorm's strength. On the softer ground any tracks left before dawn would have long since been obliterated.

Voices broke into Conan's study of the ground, coming up behind him.

"—old crone's fancies," came in Farad's voice.

"Old crone? Is that what you see when you look at me?" That could only be Omyela.

"With my eyes, yes. We Afghulis are not much for magic."

"Hmmp. We call that 'stone-brained' among my folk. I see a stone-brained young warrior who loves his chief's woman."

Only Farad's trying to choke back an angry retort broke the ensuing silence. That, and Conan's swift feet as he hurried back to the others.

"What Bethina is to me, and I to her, and what Farad may be toward both of us, is not for spreading on the desert wind like camel-stink," Conan said sharply. He did not look at either Omyela or Farad, but saw out of the corner of his eye that both took the chiding to heart.

"Now, Omyela, you had some—what Farad called by a rude name—to speak of to me? True?"

The old woman inclined her head with almost regal grace. "That is so, Cimmerian. My 'fancies' tell me where lies the Valley of the Mists."

That silenced even Farad, and the two men listened with great attention as Omyela explained. Conan had no more love for sorcery than ever, but in his years of adventuring, magic-wielders had sometimes been more help than hindrance. Omyela was looking to be one such.

He hoped she was. The Kezankian Mountains were full of valleys, some known only to the mountain folk who lived in or about them, others hardly visited at all by mortal men. It would take longer than they could afford, climbing among the peaks and peering into each valley—and perhaps learning that they had found the Valley of the Mists when its witch-Lady hurled her magic at them.

"You say you have sensed what is both alive and dead, and can guide us to it?" Conan said, by way of prodding Omyela into brevity.

"Yes, with some help," Omyela said. "One of those who goes to the valley must be a woman. What I will be using is woman's magic."

Farad and Conan looked at each other, then at Omyela. Neither could imagine her climbing up mountains and down into valleys where both armed warriors and potent spells awaited. Neither could doubt that the woman she meant to send against those perils was Bethina.

Fortunately for the peace of the quest, neither of them said a word against it. They knew Bethina—and a moment later she appeared from behind a rock, as if Omyela had conjured her out of the air.

Farad and Conan could only exchange looks again, and then listen as Omyela finished her explanation of how to fight the menace of the Valley of the Mists.

"I will wear one amulet, Bethina the other. All that either of us knows, the other will know too. My power can pass into Bethina, so if she is with you, it will be as if I were."

"You say that you have sensed the Mist, and from that sensing, you know where the Valley lies," Conan said. "What of the Mist sensing you, and where *you* are?"

"The Mist does not yet have that power by itself," Omyela said—rather complacently, Conan thought. He hoped Omyela would not be numbered among those adepts of sorcery who had trusted old knowledge too much when they faced new foes. That was a bad habit among the breed, he'd discovered, and one reason why they were often no match for a well-taught warrior.

"The Lady of the Mists has that power, if she chooses to wield it," Omyela continued. "But I have not sensed her using it. One wonders if her power weakens, or if she has grown lazy in guarding herself and her valley."

"The more she has, the better for us," Farad said. "A witch is a foe I'll gladly take when her back is turned."

"Ah, that may be your hope," Omyela said. "But it should not be. The less the Lady of the Mists binds her creation, the more it will seek power for itself. The more power it finds, the wider it can spread, feeding as it comes. If it grows enough, the Mist will be the doom of all who face it."

Silence followed, broken only by the piping of the wind among distant peaks, and by a bird cry that to Conan's ears did not sound quite natural.

Conan divided his band before they plunged into the Kezankians on the trail of the Valley of the Mists. This was not much to his liking—dividing your strength just before you closed with the enemy was no way to gain victory. But if one could neither take old Omyela into the high mountains nor safely leave her alone, what else was a man to do?

Nor was it much to the liking of the men left behind. Tales of the valley's warrior women had grown with the retelling, like mushrooms in the dark, and every man dreamed of grappling a Maiden of the Mists.

Conan came down on those dreams with a heavy boot. "If they're coming at you with swords, use yours and not some other weapon, or you'll be vulture-fodder. *I* won't sing a death-song for you, either. I've no breath to waste on fools.

"If they don't fight, they're lawful prisoners and they'll have lawful treatment from any man who wants to keep his head on his shoulders."

The Cimmerian's demeanor was so ferocious that the men immediately swore potent oaths to do as he wished. He doubted all of them swore

without some inward doubts, but that was why his Afghulis were going with him. They sometimes wondered at Cimmerian ways, but they always obeyed the chief to whom they were blood-sworn. They would cheerfully skewer any of Bethina's tribesfolk who went against their chief's command.

Surprisingly, Omyela herself was none too pleased at a division of the band intended to protect her. "I can deal with any foe likely to come upon me quite well without you keeping a dozen good warriors idling," she snapped.

"How?" he asked. "By making yourself invisible?"

"It is within my powers to do that," Omyela said, complacently. "Also, guards cannot protect me if the Lady of the Mists strikes at me with her magic. They can only be fresh prey for her."

"Yes, but if you are hiding from loosefeet, can you also fight the Lady? How many spells can you cast at once, Omyela?"

"Enough."

"I think not, lady."

"Who are you to tell me the extent of my powers?"

"Someone who has come alive out of battles with a good many sorcerers because they thought they could do everything. The one thing they could not do allowed me to escape, sometimes to kill them into the bargain.

"You've spoken of this Mist being the doom of us all. If you can't fight it, another dozen or score or ten score men in the mountains won't help. If you can—"

Omyela held up a hand. "Indeed, I see that Bethina sings the praises of your wisdom with good reason. Also other aspects of you. Have you thought of wedding her?"

A dagger thrust at his ribs could hardly have surprised the Cimmerian more. "I have not."

"Well that you should do so, Cimmerian. If she had a consort of your prowess in battle, those who follow her brother would swiftly leave his banners. Her father would have a son worthy of him, and in time the Ekinari a chief worthy of them."

"I will think on it, Omyela. But first, let all of us come back down the mountains alive."

"There is that, to be sure."

Conan left Omyela hoping that she would not remember this conversation, but fearing otherwise. She had weighty reasons behind her, but the Cimmerian had his own as well.

Plainly, the first was Farad's regard for Bethina and hers for him. Wedding her would be taking another man's woman, and a surer way to make enemies, neither gods nor men had yet devised.

The second was the Turanian price on Conan's head. Yezdigerd would never tolerate seeing a desert tribe so close to his borders under the chieftainship of an enemy of Turan.

The last was Doiran's followers. Not all of them would turn their coats, nor would all of the rest flee. Too many would remain within stabbing distance of the new chief for Conan ever to take easy sleep—or for Bethina and her kin to do so, either.

It would have been less perilous to stay in Afghulistan, and there was an end to the matter!

The first person the Mist fed on of its own will was a half-witted girl—born so, not turned into one of the Lady's creatures by magic. She had the wits to wield a small knife, and to avoid falling from high places, so she was often sent up the sides of the valley to cut brush for the cookfires.

She had done her work so well in days gone by that she had cleared the brush from all the lower slopes in the area given to her. So she climbed higher than ever, holding her knife between her teeth—her single garment had no belt or pockets.

She finally ended her climb on a ledge where several bushes were growing. She cut all the branches that were thin enough for her knife, then looked around for more before she bundled them up to carry back down the hill.

In a crack in the rock she saw what looked like another bush growing, with yellow berries and thin branches that would cut easily. She had to reach very far in to even touch the branches, and she soon realized that she would not in truth be able to cut them easily.

She was trying to decide what to do next, and meanwhile reaching in over and over again, when her fingers touched something cold. It felt as cold as ice or springwater, but it was not solid or liquid. It felt like a wind blowing on her fingers.

Then her fingers began to hurt. The pain grew so fierce that she cried

out. She tried to pull her hand out, to see if her fingers were all right. But the crack in the rock seemed to be holding not just her hand now, but her whole arm.

Then the cold covered the arm, and after it came more pain. This time she screamed loud enough to raise echoes, and pulled with all her strength, trying to free herself.

It was useless. No one heard her screams, thinking they were bird cries. She could not pull free, and a moment later the Mist found a blood vessel and darted up through it to the girl's brain. The life went out of her eyes, although she did not fall, but remained sitting while her body slowly shrank in on itself, turning blue, until nothing remained but a trifle of powder to fall to the ground or blow away on the breeze.

The girl was the first. She would not be the last.

Conan and Bethina were once again well ahead of the rest of their band. But there was no water in sight, let alone pools for bathing or beds of lichen for taking their pleasure.

Still, Conan could not help admiring her lithe form, well displayed in snug trousers and short coat, as she clambered up the rocks beside him. Bethina was not for him, and indeed no woman could be, as long as he was a rover—and that might mean he would die unwed, even if he lived long enough that his old playmates in Cimmeria were gray-bearded grandsires.

But there were women with whom he could live in as much peace as man and woman could expect, and Bethina was of that breed.

A sound Conan could not identify made him halt and raise a hand for silence. Bethina was as good a scout as any the Cimmerian had seen in a regular host, ready to obey his signals and growing more skilled each day in hiding herself. It did not hurt that her clothes were a grayish-brown that blended with the rocks so that if she lay still, one could almost tread on her without seeing her.

The sound came again. It was the chink of metal on stone, not a sound natural to these mountains or any other. Conan's band was almost on the border of the land where the Valley of the Mist's Khorajan allies and their bandit mercenaries prowled. A battle now could give warning enough to raise defenses that neither Conan's blade nor Omyela's magic could breach.

Conan crouched, listening intently, trying to put a direction to the sound. It seemed that it might be from behind him, but that was unlikely.

Those immediately behind him were his Afghulis, more cat-footed on rocky slopes than even the Cimmerian himself.

He decided to go to ground himself and wait for the noisemaker to reveal himself. If it was an enemy trying to slip up on the Cimmerian through the Afghulis, he had only moments to live. Conan would not have to draw a blade before his followers dealt with the man—and in the deadly silence that helped make the Afghulis such respected foes and their rugged homeland free of foreign enemies in most years.

Silence came to the mountainside. Conan would have sworn that even the birds and the winds were silent. He could hear his own breathing and, just barely, Bethina's. But of he who had made that revealing noise, there was no further sign.

All at once there was more noise, and from high above. Conan shifted his position to look uphill, and saw a pack train ambling across the slope. Conan counted twelve pack mules and six guards on foot, all with bows and short swords of no particular origin—the sort of weapons a mercenary might pick up in the bazaars of fifty different cities.

But their garb was not that of any tribe, and in this part of the mountains that made them enemies.

Their distance and their bows also made them enemies well out of reach. Climbing up against their archery would be slow work and bring quick death to many of those who tried it, besides giving the alarm. Conan braced himself against a rock and slowly rose to his feet, invisible from above but hopefully not so from below.

He was raising his arms in the signal for stillness and silence when a man leapt from the rocks to his right. Conan had one moment to recognize the man whom he'd punished for being slow to swear obedience.

Then the man hurled himself at the Cimmerian, dagger in hand, and Conan was fighting for his life.

The man was slighter and shorter than he, but had surprise on his side and the strength and agility of a leopard, making him no mean foe even for one of the Cimmerian's prowess.

The man's rush drove Conan back against the rock, and his head cracked hard against it. This slowed his drawing his own blade, so that the man slashed at his wrist and made it fall. Conan hammered a fist into the man's face, or at least so aimed it, but the man bobbed aside and the blow only struck his shoulder.

That was still enough to knock him back, but he sprang up again like a



child's weighted toy. Now Bethina closed from Conan's left, and he frantically gestured for her to stand clear. It was not in him to shout yet, although he feared that a deaf man in the pack train could already have heard the fight.

The man stamped a foot on Conan's blade, at the same time pivoting on the foot and kicking at the Cimmerian's groin. Conan rode with the kick, taking it on his hip, and picked up his sword, which gave him the edge in reach.

But that also opened the distance between him and his opponent. Before the Cimmerian could strike again, the man leapt at Bethina.

"Doiran is chief!" the man screamed, and the dagger flashed down.

It never reached Bethina, and only partly because she fell and rolled out from under its slash. It still would have torn her open, except that another dagger suddenly blossomed in the back of the man's neck. He stiffened, his own point wavered, blood gushed from his mouth, and he fell almost on top of Bethina.

Farad stepped out of the rocks, a second dagger held by the point in his hand and a grim look on his face. His face grew grimmer still as he saw Bethina, lying still and blood-spattered almost within reach of the would-be assassin.

Then he stopped in midstride, as Bethina leaped to her feet and Conan laughed. A moment later Farad's face was that of a man being strangled and thoroughly enjoying the process, as Bethina wrapped her arms around him and clung to him so tightly that her feet barely touched the ground.

"Did you devise this scheme to dazzle this young lady?" Conan growled, but with a grin.

Farad looked as if he'd been slapped, and Bethina glared at the Cimmerian.

"This is the first I knew of either man's presence, and much good yours did me!" Then she shook her head. "Forgive me, Conan. This—I did not think we might have my brother's spies among us."

"I did," Farad said, regaining his voice. "But I could not be sure. If I simply made the man disappear some night, his tribesfolk would take it ill. So I trusted to my tracking skills, to follow the man until he did some mischief."

"It would not have hurt if you'd followed him a trifle closer," Conan said, holding up his bloody left wrist. "You might have stopped him before he did this, or even made a sound. There was a pack train uphill, and if

they're not alert now, I'm a Stygian!"

Farad quickly begged his chief's pardon and went to see what the pack train had done. Not much to Conan's surprise, the Afghuli reported that they had dashed off fast enough for at least two mules to fall.

They were barely in sight to the west, and not slackening their speed.

"As well that they had orders to guard the mules and not fight," Conan said, "or we'd have had arrows about our ears and maybe in other places before this. But the alarm will be up."

"Should I go up and pick over the fallen mules? They may tell us something—"

"And what's to tell you that the guards haven't left an archer behind just to pick off the curious? We can't lose you, Farad. We need you to lead in my place if the next would-be assassin aims his steel better."

Farad and Bethina looked at one another, then Farad cleared his throat. "My chief. Suppose that we pretend this one *did* aim well? If they have not seen you alive after the fight, how can they know you are not dead?"

"Yes," Bethina added. "We can make a great mourning for you, and pretend to build a cairn."

"I don't mind that," Conan said, "as long as you don't actually put me under it alive. But—do I smell a ruse?"

Farad nodded. "You said yourself that the alarm is now given. But if they think we are defeated, despairing, about to withdraw, they will be less alert. They may even come down to attack us, on *our* own ground."

"Farad," Conan said. "When we are done with misty Ladies and their valleys, we shall return to Afghulistan. There *I* will support *you* for chief of the whole people!"

"If you do, you go alone," Bethina snapped. "I will not perch on a mountain like a rock-ape—"

"You say this of Afghulistan, when your people roam the desert from well to well, not staying under a roof three nights out of the year?"

"Better than have the roofs fall in on us when—"

By then Conan had decided to take himself off out of hearing of the lovers' first quarrel. He hoped they would make peace soon; he did not need them at daggers drawn with each other while carrying out the ruse.

But why in the name of all the gods had Bethina taken *him*, if she'd had her eye on Farad all along as much as he had on her? It was not in Conan

to regret a delightful tumble with a fine young woman, but blood-feuds had begun over less.

Fortunately, the Afghuli was a proven warrior and old enough to be a wiser head to Bethina, as well as in fettle to remind her that she was a woman any time she wished it. She could have chosen worse. She *would* have chosen worse, had she set herself wholly on the Cimmerian.

And it still made precious little sense, unless one accepted the truth that the ways of women were hardly more predictable than those of the gods. At least women were human, and few priests claimed to understand them, but otherwise the difference sometimes seemed too small for a man's discerning.

Muhbaras was at sword practice when the messenger arrived.

He listened to the man, while turning his gaze from the darkening slopes of the mountain to the gate of the valley. *The* men posted there had reported that since early morning the Maidens would not talk to them, and seemed pale and drawn, as with a fever. One man said that he had heard inhuman cries from beyond the gate, and maintained this in the face of the scoffing of his comrades.

Muhbaras wished that he had no duties toward his men, or at least none that would keep him from the Lady's side. Then he put the wish away. He was no sorcerer, and however well wielded, few swords availed much against magic gone awry. Also, the Lady had her pride, and would not thank him for seeing her weak.

Moreover, if the messenger spoke the truth, Muhbaras was needed more than ever in the outer world, Muhbaras and all his men.

"If I took you a half-glass's ride down the path, you'd see where they're making the cairn," the messenger concluded. "They've their chief all laid out proper, with his grave goods and sword, and enough stones ready to pile on him to keep out lions let alone wolves. Most likely they'll lay him down at dawn, and build the cairn during the day. That's the way of the tribes, leastways the ones I know."

The messenger was a seasoned veteran, one of the handful remaining, and had likely forgotten more about the people of these mountains than Muhbaras had known when he came to them. He would trust the man for anything he had seen with his own eyes, and they had seen a good deal.

"Very well," Muhbaras said. "You shall have a proper reward for this work, and soon."

"Tonight, Captain, or I might not be living to spend it."

Muhbaras wondered if the soldier had heard the tales of fear within the valley. He did not dare ask.

Then the man grinned. "No, it's just that I reckon you're about taking us down to clean those tribesfolk off our mountain. Chancy work in the dark, even if they've lost their chief. There's a Maiden I've wanted to gift a mite, for her kindness to me, and surely you wouldn't be quarreling with a man's doing that, would you?"

Muhbaras laughed and drew two silver coins from his purse. "I would not, and here's your reward. Save something for the fighting, though."

"Aye, Captain, I'll do that, and you take your own advice too."

Left alone, Muhbaras considered various schemes, but knew time was short. He decided that nothing would serve better than a straightforward night attack with every man he could spare. That would have to be everyone, as he had too few seasoned warriors among the bandits and unfledged recruits to divide his forces.

That also meant putting the pay chests and other valuables in a safe place. The only man who could be spared for that was Ermik, which was rather like trusting a mouse to the care of a serpent. But the serpent might not be hungry. The oncoming raiders surely would be.

Then he wrote three short letters. One was for his superiors in Khoraja. It accepted all blame, if such there was, and absolved his men. Then he wrote one for the Maidens, which he left unsealed. Even Ermik should be able to read his message that the Maidens should be doubly watchful tonight and for some nights to come, with human foes closer to the valley than for some years.

His last letter, he sealed as tightly as he could.

It was not a letter that schoolchildren would be made to recite in future years. It was not a letter that anyone except the woman who read it would long remember. It was merely the letter of a man to the woman he loves, before he goes out to battle, hoping to return in triumph but asking her to remember him if his luck is out.

However, in all the years that such letters had been written, there could not have been many written by a warrior to a sorceress.

In her innermost chamber, where not even her serving Maidens were admitted, the Lady awoke and threw off her blankets. She had come to

find it easier to add blankets to her bed, rather than use her magic to keep the chamber warm at all times.

She had not abandoned sleeping unclothed, however, as her mirror showed her. For a moment she wished the mirror were Muhbaras's eyes—the desire she read in them was so beautiful to see, so unlike what she had expected from men for so long, that it aroused her almost as much as his caresses.

Then she drew on a chamber robe, rinsed the sleep from her mouth, and sat down at her scrying table. She had not sat there for some days, although the wards she had placed on it earlier should have been sufficient to warn her of anything amiss. Not that there ever had been, except in the days when she thought ruling the Maidens like a tyrant would help her cause, but still...

Her hands tingled the moment they touched the table, and a dozen shades of blueness swirled in the glass, until it was like peering down into a bottomless well of luminous water. At the very bottom, she sensed the Mist she had brought into being and fed for so long.

Until recent days, that is. She knew what Muh-baras thought of those sacrifices, even when they were of useless mouths and made cleanly, without pain. She could not help but know, after lying in his arms so many times.

She also could not help what had gone before, but she could keep it from happening again. There had to be a way of constraining the Mist, so that it would at least be harmless. Meanwhile, it had not been strong enough to feed by itself the last time she offered life essences to it. A moon or two of fasting would do the Mist no harm.

Now her questing spell touched the Mist—before she had expected, indeed. She strengthened the touch—and it was as if the Mist *pushed back*, as Muhbaras sometimes did when they mock-wrestled to a love-fall...

But this was not a friendly push. It was like a man swatting at a fly, with great strength. More strength than the Mist should have. As much strength as it would have had, if it had been fed regularly all these past days while she loved Muhbaras.

The Lady withdrew the questing spell and rose from the table. Something was amiss, and she intended to seek answers (at least at first) without casting any more spells.

## Sixteen

The Mist did not distinguish between friend and enemy. Those were distinctions too subtle for it.

But it could tell what lived from what did not live. It could also tell what life it could feed on, and what life it could not.

In the time since it first fed of its own will, it had also learned to tell those who helped it to feed from those who would hinder it. It saw the second kind, not as enemies, but as more food.

Waiting for a night attack by a formidable foe, high in thin cold mountain air, after a long day of marching and fighting and with a wounded wrist throbbing none too gently, is no man's idea of pleasure. Not even the most hardened of Cimmerian warriors.

Not even Conan's.

However, he had not expected this quest to bring much pleasure. If he and his Afghulis left Turan with a whole skin and some of their jewels, that would be enough.

Oh, and to be sure, it would be as well if this Lady of the Mists and her magical menaces were also put down. But Conan was beginning to wonder if the Lady was only a tale.

Here they were in her mountains, and according to Omyela (speaking through Bethina), so close to the valley that a child could have walked the distance in half a morning. All they had seen were humans, and not the most formidable sort of humans either. Even Omyela could not say for certain that the Lady's magic was still potent—although Conan knew that some kinds of spells were shields against detection. Dangerous ones, more often than not, commanded by potent sorcerers—and the Lady was one, if she was anything at all, Conan stretched cramped muscles. He lay on his bier, playing the "dead chief by night as he had by day. Just after the light vanished, he'd slipped off the bier to relieve himself and snatch bean-bread and sausage from his pack, while Farad took his place. Then it was back to playing his own corpse, while a string of "mourners" marched around the bier, making the din demanded by custom.

Conan only hoped that they didn't keep the sentries from hearing the noise of the approaching attack.

A lull in the mourning, and then soft footsteps approaching. He had heard them before, and recognized Bethina's pace. Before she had been

with Farad, but now she was alone.

The footsteps halted. Conan heard soft breathing, smelled warm woman (not recently bathed, but then who among them had for some days?), then felt tears fall on his face.

"Ha, lass," he whispered. "I'm not dead yet."

"I know. I would weep for you, though, if you were."

"Even though you're going to wed Farad?"

"Even so."

"Well, then, be sure that he tells you about his three wives and seventeen children back in Afghuli-stan. He—"

Conan felt a cold sharp point at his throat. "Conan, you are jesting, are you not?"

It took some effort to command his voice. "Yes. Farad has no wife, and not much in Afghulistan to draw him back. What he says, you can believe."

"I am grateful." Suddenly the point was withdrawn and warm arms fell around his neck. "I am also frightened. When will they come?"

"Easy there, Bethina. I know it's hard, waiting for an enemy you know is out there to spring on you. But we're on our own ground. They're stumbling around in the dark, wondering if they will have any warning or if they're about to fall into a trap.

"Believe me, I've done both, and we have the easier work tonight."

"I can almost believe you. I will believe you, if you hold me."

"Farad—"

"I told him where I was going, when he went out to the sentries. He blessed me."

"Not me?" Conan scoffed. "The ungrateful hound! I bring him from a flea-ridden hut to the embraces of—"

"Hsst!" Bethina said, in a very different manner. Conan put his arm around her but was silent.

Then they both heard it—a high, wailing cry that might have been an abandoned babe. But it was many times too loud and seemed to come from both the rock of the mountains and the stars in the sky at once.

Muhbaras heard the sound, too, and his first thought was that one of

the raiders' sentries was blowing a whistle to give the alarm. Then it swelled until it was almost painful to hear, and he ceased to believe that it could be natural.

What he wanted to believe was that the Lady of the Mists was calling on her powers to aid him. What he feared was that magic was on the march tonight, without the Lady's leave.

He did not know to what god he could lawfully pray, for the victory of one who had delved into matters forbidden by those same gods. He also wondered if he could pray for his own victory, seeing that he was bound by the most ancient of human ties to that same delver into the forbidden.

Since Muhbaras did not know how to pray, he did not do so. Instead he devoted all his attention to keeping on his feet as he led his men down across the scree-strewn slope. A stone turning under somebody's feet could do worse than give the alarm. It could tumble a man, so that he took others off their feet until the whole raiding party slid downhill like a living avalanche, to end up helpless amid the rubble while their enemies cut their throats.

Mountains were no place for moving fast at night, and here the bandits had the advantage over their lowlander comrades. They *knew* ground was supposed to be rubble-strewn and slanting, and their feet found safe paths without demanding direction from their wits or senses.

Muhbaras's eyes had long since accustomed themselves to the darkness, although his night-sight was not of the keenest. He saw that he himself was running almost straight at the dead chief's bier, and that some of the men on his flanks were well ahead of him.

He could almost be grateful to the terrible cry in the night. It had to be drawing all his enemies' attention, and completely drowning out the footfalls of his men. They would strike by surprise, and that alone might give them the edge.

Muhbaras put out of his mind the thought that the magic unloosed in the night might make meaningless the difference between victor and vanquished. It was disloyal to his Lady, it might unman him, and it might even be untrue.

Conan waited until the last moment of the attackers' approach. He had plenty of warning, not only from the sentries (who gave ground before the onrush without engaging) but from the "mourners" around him.

Among them was Bethina, who was keeping her courage and her wits



about her for all that she was plainly fearful of what might befall Farad out on the sentry line. She moaned and wailed quite convincingly, and in between the moans gave Conan the numbers of the enemy. When the number reached fifty and grew no higher, Conan heaved a gusty sigh.

That was odds of no more than two to one, and ensured a battle rather than a massacre. But he trusted his men; when the fight was over there should be little between them and the Valley of the Mists.

Little of human contriving, that is.

Conan moved enough to see the sentries pelting past the archers climbing on the piled stones, to give themselves clear shots over the heads of their friends into the ranks of their foes. The clatter of onrushing feet on stones was now louder than the wailing in the sky.

Then the first of the enemy burst out of the night. A lean man in ragged robes, he leapt clean over Conan's bier, to meet Bethina's dagger full in his chest.

His death-cry made all other sounds seem like a hush. Conan rolled off the other side of the bier, drawing both dagger and broadsword in a single motion as he came to his feet. Both blades found living flesh as they were drawn, and two enemies crumpled before Conan had taken three steps from the bier.

A third man stared at the Cimmerian, gibbering like a bee-stung ape.

"Your pardon for coming back from the dead, but I had work to do," Conan said. His broadsword licked out and the man's head lolled on his shoulders. He fell backward into the path of a fourth man, who was agile enough to leap aside but not enough so to escape the downswing of Conan's sword.

It was only a flesh wound to the man's left arm, and he wielded the tulwar in his right hand with no loss of speed or skill. Conan feinted with his dagger to draw the man into a furious slash that put him briefly off balance and in reach of the broadsword. The broadsword ended the fight, opening the man's chest, across half his ribs and down to his heart and lungs.

Conan had now slain four men in hardly more time than it would have taken to draw that many breaths. His rising from the dead had not frightened as many enemies witless as he had hoped, but it had left him well inside their ranks.

A squarely built man with a grizzled beard now came at Conan. The man had nearly the Cimmerian's reach and much of his strength, but not

his speed. Conan could not use all his swiftness of foot, eye, and hand on this rough ground with enemies lurking in every direction.

So he and the bearded man went at it for a good long while for such a fight, which is to say all of a minute or two. They also fought unhindered by either friends or foes, which might have been chivalry but was more likely that the two wove about them a web of flying steel such that no prudent man dared draw close.

The bearded man drew Conan's blood twice, and the Cimmerian considered that this quest was giving him more scars than usual. Then his opponent made a downward cut that was just a trifle too predictable, and Conan caught the man's blade with his dagger.

Pushing back hard, the Cimmerian locked the other's blade between them, then brought his broadsword about in a sweeping stroke.

It struck flat-bladed; Conan wanted a prisoner. Too much that they had not expected was abroad tonight, and this man had to know more than Conan did! Besides, the man was too good an opponent to kill without good cause.

The blow knocked the man's helmet awry and staggered him without stunning him. He lurched back, clearing his blade and drawing a short hill knife from his belt. Conan brought a knee up into the man's groin and slammed the hilt of his broadsword into the other's jaw.

Those two blows were almost enough. The man still thrust his knife weakly at Conan, touching the Cimmerian's scarred chest. Then he reeled and fell, his steel falling from limp hands.

Conan stepped back from his fallen opponent and looked around. The archers from the stone pile were now at work, and arrows whistled by close enough to be heard over the cry of the night. The cries when they struck living flesh were even louder; Conan counted half a dozen writhing or still forms within spear-throw.

Now to see to his prisoner, and hope that no one tried to kill him or trample on the man while he was doing that.

Conan had just gripped the man's ankles when the cry in the night doubled, then redoubled, until all the world seemed to be one terrible wailing that seemed to signal the death of gods or even of the universe itself.

In the valley, the Lady of the Mists was running for the first time in some years. She was relieved to discover that her wind and limbs were still

sound enough to let her make good speed.

Or perhaps she owed her speed to being sensibly clad, with stout shoes and a tunic and trousers borrowed from one of the servants. They were not the best fit, but she was conscious as never before how keeping the chill wind from her skin and the stones of the paths from her bare feet allowed her to make better time on her journey.

Of course, it would be well to doff all her garments as usual when it came time to wield her magic. Meanwhile, though, no one would take her for the Lady of the Mists or perhaps even for a woman, as the garments were large enough to alter her shape. Even in the uncanny light the Mist was pouring out into the Valley, her staff might also look like a shepherd's crook or a bearer's walking stick.

Besides, it would take sharp and untroubled wits to even think of the Lady's rushing about so meanly clad, let alone be trying to pierce the disguise of everyone who passed. She did not doubt that there were sharp wits among the folk in the valley, not all of whom were foolish either by nature or her creation. But she doubted that they would be untroubled.

She herself was not untroubled, and as she strode along the path toward the Cave of the Mists, she recited old cantrips to soothe herself. The Mist had begun to feed of its own volition, and that terrible blue light spreading out into the valley was frightening both those who knew what it meant and those who did not. The more fearful the valley dwellers, the more they would run about like headless fowl without taking thought for their own safety.

Not that they could easily procure it. Men and women were going to die tonight, and each death would feed a life essence into the Mist, making it stronger to seek out the next victim. (She would not use the word "sacrifice" tonight, and had begun to think that she never should have.)

At least they could run toward the mouth of the valley. The Mist was bound to the magic in the rocks of the valley, the magic going back to the time of Acheron. It could not leave the valley unless it devoured many more life essences than it had found so far.

And unless she was no longer there to contend with it.

What her magic had wrought, it could undo. This might not earn her a kinder judgment from anyone except Muhbaras, who was—as he was, and she would not try to find words for it. She was no poet either. In time, when they had lived together in the outside world, she a soldier's lady, he a soldier of Khoraja, one of them might find such words.

That time would not come tonight.

She needed to be closer to the Eye of the Mist to wield the needful spells with appropriate power, so she hastened her pace. As she moved, she called to the minds of everyone she passed, and hoped that the call reached beyond the range of her eyes.

*Flee the valley. Flee the valley. Flee to the valley, and beyond it. The valley is death. Outside lies hope.*

She repeated this, and one or two folk on the path turned and stared about them, as if seeking the source of the message that seemed to be touching their minds without touching their ears. She almost laughed. That was another way of remaining disguised—a call to the mind did not mean using one's all-too-recognizable voice.

Conan was now backed against the pile of stones. This left him all the fighting room he needed to front and flanks. Not all of the archers atop the pile still lived, but both living and dead had wrought havoc in the enemy's ranks. They were coming at Conan and the remaining defenders on the ground with barely half their strength remaining fighting-fit.

Bethina crouched behind Farad and Conan, her hand gripping her dagger but her eyes seeing nothing. She had not uttered any of Omyela's messages since battle was joined, but her consciousness was clearly elsewhere.

Conan hoped that no one saw Bethina as the defender's weak point and hurled themselves on her. That would end in red ruin for the attackers, but perhaps also in Bethina's doom.

The Cimmerian had met a good many women he'd mourn less than Bethina, altogether apart from the bond with Omyela. What was loose in the valley looked very apt to doom all in its path, without Omyela's help.

Most of the folk of the Valley of the Mists who yet lived were fleeing even before the Lady bade them do so. One man trotted industriously in the same direction as the Lady.

It was Ermik, and he could not have moved as swiftly as he did had he still carried the gold entrusted to him by Muhbaras. He had left it in a safe place, hidden even from the Maidens, who in any case were likely to soon be fleeing as swiftly as the rest, too swiftly to search odd caves.

There was some danger in following the Lady as he was, even had she

not been also hurrying toward the unleashed magic. But that way must lie the Lady's treasure, dwarfing the petty sums from the pay chest. Also, that way lay learning more about the Lady's magic than Muhbaras had, for all the time he'd spent swiving her.

With gold, Ermik could buy his way free of Khoraja. With knowledge, he could buy a higher place in Khorajan service. It would be his tales of the Valley of the Mists that would be believed, not the captain's. Swiftly he would rise, and high enough that he would never again need to obey hirelings like Muhbaras.

Still, he patted the hilt of his dagger as he moved. It held a chaos stone, or one that had been sold to him as such, for a price that would make him seek blood if it did not in truth confuse any spell into whose radius it was thrown.

*If* he was alive after such a mischance. Ermik had a good spy's self-command, and animal courage. But he could not keep that ugly thought from his mind, or keep from feeling the night wind blow chill on his spine.

The attack that Conan had feared came. It began with a flight of arrows, striking with the power of Tu-ranian bows but mercifully ill aimed. One went through Bethina's hair, another gouged Farad's shoulder. The Afghuli slapped at the wound as if it were an insect bite, and brandished his tulwar.

"Come along, dead men who think they yet live. Come along and meet Farad and Conan and their comrades. We will cure you of your silly notion!"

He added a few singularly foul obscenities in Iranistani. Those who did not understand his words understood his tone, and it seemed that madmen came howling out of the night at Bethina's defenders.

In the heart of the Mist, something that might be called a will began to grow. It was a will to seek paths through the rock, following the traces of old magic that it could touch by itself. It did not need more life essences to strengthen itself, if it could do that.

The Mist ceased to be a creature of the air and became a creature of the depths of the earth. But in the heart of the incandescent blue where the Eye of the Mist had been, a crimson core began to glow.

The attack on Bethina and her defenders began as a collision and continued as a brawl. Too many men were jammed into too small a space to let anyone use art or even craftsmanship in the fighting.

That at once gave the advantage to the defenders. Conan could use the weapons nature gave him as fiercely and effectively as the man-made ones whose ways he had learned. He had never studied the barehanded (and -footed) fighting arts of Khitai, so perhaps one of the great masters of those arts might have been a match for the Cimmerian. But the Khitan would have needed luck as well as skill, and only the greatest of masters would have stood any chance of walking away from a bout with Conan.

Conan slammed his sword-weighted hand into the side of one man's neck. He punched another in the ribs so hard that he felt ribs crack under the blow, even through boiled-leather armor. He butted a third man under the chin, snapping his head back so savagely that the neck snapped like a dry branch.

Meanwhile Farad was doing much the same, with a little assistance from weapons that he had more room to wield. At the outermost fringes of his senses, Conan could hear still other comrades, but they might have been in another world for all that he could tell of what they were doing.

They had to have done well, because suddenly it was too much for the attackers. Darkness and emptiness gaped before Conan, although not silence—the ground was littered with the crippled and dying, some already crying out as the pain-blunting shock of their wounds wore away.

Conan watched the attackers retreating uphill, far scantier in numbers than when they came, and losing more men to the archers before they vanished. Then he looked around for Bethina.

He saw her a moment later, sprawled atop the prostrate form of the prisoner Conan had taken earlier. He sprang toward her, then heard a welcome, healthy oath as he accidentally trod on her outstretched foot.

"Your pardon, lady."

"I should think so. I stabbed one fellow with my dagger, but he had so much muscle, the blade stayed in him. So when the bearded one started waking up, all I could do was jump on top of him."

That seemed to have done well enough; the man's nose was a bloody mess from being slammed into the rocky ground. But he was still breathing, and indeed started to groan as Conan lifted Bethina off him.

"I can take a few of the men up and keep those fellows on the move," Farad said.

Conan shook his head. "We don't divide our strength on unknown ground. Those fellows could rally and cut you to pieces. Besides, we need to protect Bethina. When was the last time you heard from Omyela?"

Bethina looked blank, then slowed her breathing to open her mind to the other woman's message.

Conan stared at the sky. Was it his fancy, or was a crimson tint beginning to mingle with the blue glow in the sky?

The Lady of the Mists had come as close as she dared to the Eye. Any closer and she might find the ground under her feet crumbling as the Mist fed on the traces of the spells of long-dead Acheronian sorcerers, like worms feeding on the bones of long-dead animals.

It was Acheron's magic that had brought the Mist to terrible Me. Now it would be the same magic that drove it back into the nighted gulfs from which she had drawn it, so that the Valley of the Mists might be a sane and safe abode for common men and women.

She was leaving it, and she prayed she would leave it with Muhbaras. But she would not fail to leave it cleaner than she had made it.

She could not bring back the dead. She would not even ask their forgiveness, for what she had done was beyond that. She hoped for happiness in this life, before she faced the anger of her victims in another. Meanwhile, she would do what she could to keep the number of the dead from growing any further.

It would have to be a death-elemental. She had conjured one before, a being from the very darkest heart of Acheron's sinister magic. But that had been a small one, fit only to take a single human life. It had been weak and easy to control.

Now she needed one so powerful that it held enough of the essence of death to slay the Mist. That which had fed on life essences would now consume pure death, and from that consuming, die.

The Lady of the Mists removed her garments and stood wind-clad as was best for such potent magic. This close to the Mist, it was hard to imagine anyone being able to strike at her even if they saw and recognized her.

The syllables in the Secret Tongue of Acheron ran through her mind, and as she raised her staff over her head, they began to roll off her tongue.

Muhbaras had just rallied the half or less of his men who remained when a wild-eyed figure stumbled into their rear.

It was one of the Maidens, clad only in her sword and rags of garments. She was bleeding from a dozen scratches and three greater wounds, and reeling with exhaustion, pain, loss of blood, and stark terror that made her eyes seem windows into Hell.

"They are mad in there," she gasped. "Mad. The Mist marches, and they have all run mad. They are trying to get out. They say the Lady told them. We do not know where she is."

"Have you no way to reach her?"

"No. I—yes, that is true. We do not." Muhbaras wanted to shake sense or at least coherence into the woman. Instead he lowered his voice.

"If we come up and help, can you keep order?"

"Men within the valley! This cannot be—" "There have been men not only within the valley but within its Maidens and even the Lady of its Mists!" Muhbaras roared. His voice would have started a landslide had there been any loose rocks about.

The Maiden cringed. Then she nodded. "Good," Muhbaras concluded. "And when we have helped you, you will help us against the raiders who are enemies to both of us."

He hoped he was not overestimating the prowess of the Maidens in a real battle against a plainly formidable foe. He did not want to simply throw their lives away; the Lady would not thank him for that (and how wonderful it was, to think that she would be so concerned).

But he would disdain no help and no allies, as this night Muhbaras needed all of both that the gods would send him!

The rosy crimson hue was brighter and also melting into the blue so that the sky was turning an eye-searing shade of purple.

"It looks like a gigantic bed of violets, diseased and then set aflame," Bethina murmured. Or was it Omyela? The two women were talking again across the hillside, and Conan would have given a chest of silver to learn what they were saying that did not reach bodily ears.

Farad pretended to spew. Bethina grinned. "Men are so delicate of stomach. It is as well that women bear the babes. Men would die of the morning sickness even before the babe reached its term."

Farad stared. "You are not—"



"Plagues take you," Bethina said. "No. You need not fear for the blood of any sons you may see from me."

"I would not quarrel with any son of the Cimmerian's blood," Farad said, musingly. "Of course, I would still have to kill Conan before I could raise the lad with a clear conscience—ekkkhh!" he broke off, as Bethina kicked him smartly in the shin.

Then the young woman stiffened, and when she spoke, her voice had Omyela's gravity and even some of its cracked quality.

"You must go up to the gate to the valley. Follow the men you defeated. They will lead you. They will not be your enemies, for what is unleashed within the valley is the enemy to all."

Farad looked at the Cimmerian. "A child of five could understand that. But he'd be too young to be frightened witless!"

"What, an Afghuli fearful? A warrior of the folk who use sharp stones—"

"Cimmerian, I may kill you after this even if my sons are all of my own getting. Or will you save your breath for climbing?"

Ermik came upon the Lady of the Mists quite suddenly. He had no warning and she showed no sign of hearing or seeing him.

Indeed, it was unlikely that she could sense anything in the normal world. She was clad for casting a spell, her staff was glowing with a light that seemed *black*, if such a thing could be, and her eyes glowed golden.

Very lovely, she was, too, for all that she was frightening. Ermik no longer wondered at Muhbaras's desire for her, and rather regretted that he would have to put an end to the Lady without amusing himself with that beauty as well.

However, a wise man struck quickly when dealing with a witch. Ermik strode forward, tossed the dagger with the chaos stone in the hilt, caught it by the point, and threw it. He threw it directly at the Lady, so that if the chaos stone did not do its work, it still might do enough physical harm to break the Lady's concentration.

There are moments in the creation of even the most potent spell by the most adept sorcerer, when a child sneezing at the wrong moment can bring everything to ruin. The chaos stone was not worth a tenth of what Ermik had paid for it, but it was more potent than that child's sneeze, and it entered the sphere of the Lady's spell at the worst possible moment.

The point of the dagger also entered the Lady's flesh, and drove through

to a lung. The combination of chaos, broken concentration, and pain snapped her control over the death-elemental. It raved and shrieked in her mind, clutching at her with incorporeal tendrils that produced still more very corporeal pain.

The Lady died in agony of both mind and body. As she died, the death-elemental leaped free of all control. In the moments before its leap, its aura had stunned Ermik, and he lay so completely senseless that a death-elemental in haste could have mistaken him for one already dead.

This one was in haste, to flee the area where the Lady's magic lingered and had much the same effect on it as a smoke-filled room on a human being with delicate lungs. As it fled it screamed in triumph, and this scream reached human ears already half-deaf with the terror of the Mist.

Where panic had not reigned in the valley, it reigned now.

## **Seventeen**

It went much against Conan's instinctive suspicion of sorcery for him to climb the slope, let alone urge his men on. But there was no other road to the secret of the Valley of the Mists, and for the moment that road lay undefended.

The Cimmerian still did not lead a wild, scrambling rush up the mountain. Those wounded who were coming along had time to bind their wounds. Every surviving archer also collected as many arrows as he could from the quivers of the fallen, both friend and foe.

Conan himself stepped aside to speak with the prisoner, who gave his name as Bamshir.

"If I leave you unbound, will you come with us as a guide?"

Bamshir looked ready to spit on the ground, or perhaps in Conan's face. Then he shrugged.

"My life is forfeit anyhow."

"Not certainly. Besides, your men may need you to lead them, and *we* need all the help we can find against what is loose in the valley. If that is not the greatest enemy now, may I be gelded!"

Bamshir frowned. "You may well be right."

"I *am* right. And you've been living cheek by jowl with the Lady's wizardry long enough to know that without my telling you!"

After that Bamshir acceded, and Conan was even willing to give him back his eating knife. But he kept the prisoner-guide away from Bethina. Indeed, the man showed no easy mind about approaching the young woman, and made a gesture of aversion when he thought Conan was not looking.

Bethina seemed to be in a trance, and it was a miracle that she could put one foot in front of another in the darkness over this ground without falling. But her body seemed to work now without the guidance of a mind altogether bound up with Omyela's.

She would not be stabbing anyone until the battle of spellcasting was over; that was plain to see. Fortunately Farad could see that for himself, and what anyone could do to guard the woman, he would do.

Muhbaras's men reached the gate to the valley gasping and winded, but in fair order. He thought some might have fled, but of those who had remained with him, all still bore their weapons. As well, seeing that their fighting was more likely to be against hu-man foes—or humans so maddened by fear that they could not tell friend from foe.

The gate opened swiftly, cranked by two menservants with the beardless faces of eunuchs and stark terror written all over those faces. A Maiden stood by them, keeping them at their posts as she remained at hers, although her own face told of fear commanded by brute force of will.

Muhbaras did not blame any of the three. He was here for his Lady, his men, and his honor—in that order. Khoraja was but a name that would have had no power to prevent his flight but for the other three bonds that had brought him here in this dire hour.

The men filed in through the gate behind Muhbaras. Some called bawdy greetings to the Maiden, or stared around these once-forbidden precincts.

All lightness of heart vanished, however, as they marched down the path and saw the far end of the cleft in the rock. There the passage from the gate gave on the valley itself, and there purple light blazed like the forge of some mad blacksmith of the gods.

Purple light, and worse. Muhbaras saw (or at least thought he saw, and would ask no other for their opinion) patches of sky where a blackness that was not the night seemed to eat the light.

He could hope that this was the magic by which the Lady sought to subdue her own creation. Hope, perhaps pray, but no more.

"Pair off," he shouted. "Stay together, and don't let anyone get between you and your mate! Any Maidens who come up, if they're armed, have them pair off and fall into line with us. Anyone armed who is not a Maiden, disarm them."

"Then what?" someone called. "Send them out or keep them here?"

"If they won't stay, send them out. When the valley is empty, we'll take its folk down to find water and shelter until the Lady has matters in hand."

Some of the laughter that drew was bawdy, but not much of it unfriendly. So far Muhbaras still commanded his men's loyalty.

*Lady, for all our sakes, put things to rights before my men flee like your people.*

Even as they moved uphill, Conan kept his men reined in.

"Run on a slope like this, and you're likely to fall on your face. If somebody doesn't skewer you before you get up, you'll roll back down and knock out what brains you have!"

Farad added his mite to the profane cajoling, and the men mounted the slope in a compact formation, with archers well out to the flanks where they had clear shooting. Thus far they had no targets, and Conan would be quite happy if there was no more fighting on sloping ground. His Afghulis were as at home on it as he was, but Bethina's tribesfolk were accustomed to the more level desert.

Nonetheless, they and their young chieftess kept pace with the Cimmerian. Bethina no longer seemed entranced by her magical bond with Omyela, but she strode on in silence, looking neither to right or left.

She spoke first when Conan called for a short halt to realign the formation and let everyone take a few unhurried breaths.

"Omyela and I were talking."

"So I judged," Conan said. "Is it permitted to speak of what she said?"

"Oh, it is permitted, or at least I will take her permission for granted. But you do not want to hear all of it. Omyela can no more utter two words of meaning without ten words of speech than any other old woman or sorcerer."

Conan grimaced in mock-horror. "And she is both. How does she ever speak clearly?"

"Not often," Bethina said. "But I can tell you what she meant. She says there is death and life battling in the valley."

"How does that make the valley different from any other place where life exists? Death comes to every living thing, or it seems to me."

"Yes, but—how to say it?"

"Plainly and shortly. We must move on soon."

"Do you wish to wed me also, so you may command me?"

"Do you wish two husbands?"

"If they were you and Farad—"

"I'm flattered. We're in haste. Speak."

"Death and life each has—being—in the valley. Left alone, they will between them destroy it and go on to seek destruction elsewhere. Brought together, they will destroy each other."

"So all we need is to introduce the death being to the life being and stand well clear?"

"I suppose so. She did not explain."

"Just as long as she does it when it's needed," Conan said. "Otherwise there'll be no one alive here to listen to her explanation."

Bethina heard those words without flinching, which was more than some of the men did.

Muhbaras's men barely had time to order their slender ranks before the fleeing Maidens were on them. No, that did an injustice to some of the Maidens, and indeed some of the other women, Muhbaras decided. They were *retreating*, not fleeing, trying to stay ahead of the mob of fugitives but keeping themselves in fair order, and those with weapons holding on to them.

The mob behind was another matter. At intervals the sky itself seemed to howl like a living thing gone mad, and in those moments Muhbaras wanted to clap his hands over his ears. He could not have heard the cries of the fugitives if they'd been shouting in his ear—and he kept his distance from them with great care.

They were of all ages from babes to graybeards and of both sexes, as well as more than a few fresh eunuchs. Most seemed to be wearing what they could snatch up when the urge to flee struck them, which was often little or nothing. Few had anything more than their scanty garments, or at

most a loaf of flat-bread or a bunch of onions.

*Feeding these without the croplands of the valley is going to be no easy task, my Lady. But they are yours, and for your sake I will do what I must.*

Hardly any of the fugitives were the misshapen half-men, conjured into deformed existence by the Lady to do the harshest work before their time came to yield up their life essences. Whether the Mist had overtaken them, their true human neighbors slain them, or their own weakness brought them down, they would not live out the night.

Muhbaras could not find it in his heart to regret their passing, and only hoped their deaths would be for the most part merciful.

Less agreeable was the sight of several bands of well-thewed and armed men or eunuchs. These swaggered along, and Muhbaras knew that they would prey like jackals on the fugitives if they were given the slightest chance. He had encountered their breed before, and found no answer to it save sharp orders enforced by sharper steel.

Muhbaras stepped forward to meet the first three.

"Halt and disarm!" he said, not quite shouting but raising his voice loud enough to be heard over the fugitives' gabble. The sky screamed at that moment, so he had to repeat the command.

"Who are you to be giving orders?" the biggest man snapped.

"Captain Muhbaras of the Khorajan service," was the reply.

The man drew his sword. Muhbaras drew his faster. Its point was at the man's throat before the other's blade could rise into fighting position.

The man stared at the point just barely pricking his skin and swallowed. "Ah—can I have my blade back afterward?"

"When we're—" Another howl from the sky, and something vast and black seemed to fly low overhead, like a cloud that was a window into the Abyss and cried with the voice of a mad dragon.

"That's a Maiden's sword!" screamed a voice from behind Muhbaras. He turned, taking his eye off the man, who jerked his blade up and nearly laid Muhbaras's cheek open.

Then Muhbaras was trying to fight at the same time the man and a wild-eyed Maiden determined to avenge her unknown comrade. The fugitives had broken into a run now, all who could move that fast, and both the unarmed and the armed were streaming past, jostling the fighters without regard to the flying steel.

In the confusion the Maiden tried to watch her back, Muhbaras, and the man at the same time. She could not quite contrive this, and the man laid open the side of her neck with a wild slash. The next moment Muhbaras pierced him through the throat, and he fell beside the woman.

Muhbaras looked at the fallen Maiden, cursed everything save the Lady herself, and even allowed himself a few unkind thoughts about her. He would not be able to forget this night of madness, and it would always lie between them even when they lay in each other's arms.

Then the greatest cry of all rose from the valley, as if the mountains themselves were in mortal agony, likewise the stars, the air, the water, and every living thing within reach of the unleashed magic. It was the sound of madness, and Muhbaras saw that on the faces of his men and the Maidens who had stood thus far.

He closed his eyes, to shut out the nightmare vision. When he opened them he still lived, and only the echoes of that cry remained pealing about the valley.

But he was alone, except for the dead and those too spent to run.

Alone, with no further duties to anyone but the Lady. Alone, and free to go to her, to hold her, to carry her out of this antechamber of Hell.

Muhbaras had a dim notion that perhaps there was some madness in him, too, that he thought this. His men still lived, likewise the Maidens and the fugitives. He could do more for them than for the Lady, if she yet lived.

It was the thought of her death that finally turned Muhbaras's steps toward the valley. Nothing remained in his mind but that thought. If she was dead, he must find her body before anyone else.

Sword in hand, Captain Muhbaras stumbled down into the Valley of the Mists, along the path that the Lady herself had followed only a short while before.

The gate to the valley stood open when Conan led his companions toward it. The gateway was also vomiting people, wide-eyed, ragged, some wounded, all staggering with exhaustion and half-witless with fear.

Conan did not even try to stop the outpouring with his handful of men. Nor did he really wish to. If the Lady of the Mists was soon to be a queen without subjects, many of her teeth would be drawn without the Cimmerian's having to labor at it.

Conan was proud of the victories he had wrought with his strength and skill. He was not so proud of them that he would refuse a victory handed to him by fate.

There were armed men and some armed women among the fleeing people. Some of the armed men had the look of those who had picked up fallen weapons with an eye to carving from others' misery what fortune they could. Others, the women included, wore armor and had about them the air of an army in retreat.

"Those women are the Maidens of the Lady," Bamshir said, low-voiced. "The armored men are Muhbaras's. I know some of them."

"Do you see Muhbaras?"

"I have not yet. He would be the last to flee. Even if the men did, he himself would go forward to seek the Lady." Bamshir added, in a still lower voice, "He loved her, it is known. And I think she loved him back."

Conan tried not to gape. The idea of loving a sorceress chilled him to the marrow. The idea of being loved by one—well, he had survived the affections of many sorts of dangerous women, but any man who played love games with a witch loved danger even more than the Cimmerian did.

"Then let us seek your captain, and perhaps when we find him, we shall find the Lady."

Conan led the way, and Farad, Bethina, and Bamshir followed almost shoulder to shoulder through the gateway.

Muhbaras was vaguely aware that the ground under his feet was shaking. He did not slow, or even break stride. He was running like a man who will stop when his heart does, who will keep running in midair if the ground drops away beneath him, fall, and land running still.

He might never have had soldiers, or anything else behind him to think of. All his thoughts roved the valley ahead, seeking his Lady.

*Do you yet live? Send me a sign, if you do!*

He knew that he was crying out for that sign like a child for a second bowl of porridge. He did not care. Before the Lady, before his love for her, he had no more shame.

Not so vaguely, he became aware that the sky was turning solid and beginning to whirl. He also saw that the solidity took the form of two vast spirals, like whirlwinds of unimaginable proportions. One was purple, the other was a black that seemed to both repel and swallow light at once.



They leaped skyward from different parts of the valley, and leaned toward one another like partners in an obscene dance. Then they drew back, swayed, leaned forward again, and repeated this over and over again.

Either they were silent now, or Muhbaras's ears had ceased to accept new sounds. No, that was not quite so. When the ground before him cracked wide so that he had to leap or be swallowed up, he heard the shrill sundering of rock and the thud of his boots landing on the far side.

Then he heard only his own rasping breath as he ran on.

Conan watched the spirals in the sky, one blazing purple and the other the black of a demon's nightmares, and knew that the unleashed magic was approaching its climax. He knew this without a word from Bethina, who indeed could not have spoken a word to save Conan's life or perhaps her own.

Bowed backward in a way that had to be torturing her spine, she stared wide-eyed into the sky. She shook her head so that her hair flew in clouds about her, and raised her arms, hands clasped together.

Those clasped hands began to glow—with a light that was all colors and no colors. Conan could neither bear to look at it nor turn his head to look away. Farad muttered curses in Afghuli, while Bamshir knelt and cried out what sounded like orthodox prayers to Mitra.

It had to be comforting to believe in the kind of god who answered prayers, or at least told his priests that he would answer them. It was a comfort Conan had always been denied.

Instead of praying, he drew his sword. Steel in hand was the way he had always sworn death would find him, and he would not be forsworn now.

The nimbus around Bethina's hands turned distinctly green. At the same time, Conan felt the ground underfoot begin to shake, and saw the walls of the valley swaying like trees in a high wind.

In another moment the earth itself would be sundered and the valley fall in on itself, obliterating everything and everyone within. Conan knew brief pleasure that at least some of the valley's folk would survive the ruin of their home—although how long they would survive starvation, disease, and the windy mountain slopes was another matter.

Then the green nimbus around Bethina's hands became a spear of green fire, hurtling upward. It struck the black spiral, encompassing it in a fugitive green glow and a shower of green sparks that seemed to rain down

from the stars themselves.

It also drove the black spiral violently forward, until it struck the purple one.

Such a sound filled the valley as Conan had never heard before and hoped never to hear again. He thought he would gladly be deaf as an adder for the rest of his days if the other choice was to hear that sound again. He also wondered if he might indeed be deaf, whether he wished it or not.

But the sound did not blind his eyes. Afterward he never talked about what he saw, even when he was telling tales of his most exotic adventures to drinking companions who had to listen to the King of Aquilonia. He did not believe what he saw then, and did not expect anyone else to believe it afterward.

He saw cliffs that had been leaning forward draw back as if pushed by giant hands. He saw chasms large enough to swallow houses suddenly close, or fill with steam and churning water. He saw boulders the size of horses plunge from on high, then float down to land with all the harshness of soap bubbles. He saw patches of ground that had been shaking like beaten carpets suddenly blossom with flowers and long grass.

He saw much else that he carried to his grave with him, and so did those with him—and most of them did the same as the Cimmerian.

Then suddenly no one saw anything, because all light left the valley. All sound did likewise—or perhaps it was only stunned ears being unable to detect more subtle sounds than the fall of mountains or the creation of new life.

In time, Conan heard the splash of new streams, the rattle of the last loose stones finding a resting place, the sigh of breezes now free to blow naturally. He even heard, far off, the bray of a donkey that had somehow survived the upheaval.

He laughed. "Bamshir, I was going to ask you to guide us. But I think we can wait here until daylight. Your captain and his Lady will not be the better for our falling downhill in the dark."

"The gods made you too sensible to be a hero, Cimmerian," Farad chaffed.

"I sometimes wonder what the gods were about when they made me," Conan said. "If they ever tell me the truth, I'll spread the word. Meanwhile, my friend, see to Bethina, and set the sentries. For now, we wait."

Muhbaras reached his Lady just as the ground seemed to turn to jelly under his feet. His final dash to where she lay turned into an undignified sprawl on his face.

He rose bruised and dusty, to see Ermik cowering back against the cliff. The spy was the color of old chalk, and not all of it was the dust on his skin.

"I—I wanted to stop her," Ermik stammered. "I tried to stop her. She was conjuring—she was casting a spell to—I used my dagger. The dagger with the chaos stone. It should have stopped her. I wanted to stop her. I wanted to—"

Muhbaras neither could nor would hear any more of this litany. He walked to the Lady's body. She lay as if in sleep, save for the death-rictus of her lovely mouth and a gaping dagger wound in her back. It must have reached her lung, but there was no sign of blood from her mouth.

The captain knelt and drew out the dagger. It was Ermik's—he recognized the silver mounting and the "chaos stone."

Muhbaras flung the dagger point-first into the ground. It stuck there, quivering even when the ground did not. Then he walked slowly toward the spy. He had not thought he had much strength left after his long run, but now it flowed into him as if from the earth itself—or perhaps the Lady's spirit.

Ermik did not know that he was about to die until Muhbaras seized him by the throat. In the next moment he knew nothing at all, because Muhbaras smashed him back against the rock hard enough to crack his skull.

That was not the end, because Muhbaras kept pounding Ermik's head against the rock and twisting his throat until he heard rocks falling down around him. He heard only three, because the fourth struck him on the shoulder and knocked him down, and the fifth struck him in the stomach as he lay on his back on the ground.

He did not hear the climax of the battle of spells, or anything else for a long time.

Conan and his men kept watch until daylight, except for Farad, who kept watch over Bethina. She was either dead or in a sleep that feigned death, and with her senseless, there was no asking Omyela for the truth.

Dawn came to the valley, and consciousness to Bethina at about the same time, and the silence of the dawn was broken by triumphant Afghuli

cries. Bamshir and his men joined in with a will—they knew they owed their lives to the women as much as they did to Conan.

Conan, Bamshir, and a band of fighters that included a few Maidens marched down into the valley as soon as they could travel safely. Even the Maidens who had spent much time there seemed bemused at the changes, and wanted to stop and gape so long that Conan needed brisk words to move them along.

They did not find the Lady until the sun was nearly overhead. They also found Muhbaras, lying beside the Lady, an arm thrown protectively across her. Furrows in the ground showed that the Khorajan had crawled to the Lady from where he had first fallen. How he had done this with two death wounds upon him, Conan did not expect even the gods to know.

He knelt by Muhbaras, sponging his blood-caked lips and listening to the man's last words.

"I—Ermik killed her. That—loosed—what you fought. Are—are the men safe?"

"All who reached the gate yet live, Captain," Bamshir said.

"Good." Muhbaras was silent for so long that Conan thought he had died. But he rolled over, groaning at the pain and effort this caused him, and rested his head upon the Lady's breast.

"Look at her. Look at those eyes. Did you ever see such beautiful golden eyes?"

Those were Muhbaras's last words. His own eyes closed by themselves, so Conan had no need to touch him. Instead he knelt, looking down at the Lady.

Golden eyes? The Lady of the Mist's eyes were larger than most, but they were a rich brown flecked with green. Eyes the color of a forest pool, deep and rich, that a man could drown in. That a man *had* drowned in—and called himself happy in doing so.

At least Conan now understood how a common man could love a sorceress. One did not love the sorceress. One found the woman inside the sorceress, and loved her.

Conan stood up. The Maidens had drawn apart, to keen and wail for their Lady. From the way some of the soldiers were looking at them, Conan wondered if they were Maidens in truth as well as in name—or would so remain long, if they were now.

He turned to Bamshir. "We will bury them together, if that does not

offend you."

"Anything else would offend the captain's spirit," the other said. "Also the Lady's—and I think the valley will be the better for it, if her spirit sleeps content."

## Epilogue

Conan rode west again, but this time he was alone. As he looked eastward, to where only the highest peaks of the Kezankian Mountains pierced the horizon, he recalled memories of this latest adventure.

The last two in particular made him smile, and more warmly than was the Cimmerian's custom.

He remembered his final conversation with Bethina. Deciding that she neither could nor would return to her tribe, she had vowed to stay in the Valley of the Mists and become chieftess of a new tribe.

An odd mixture, that tribe would be—the survivors of Khorajan soldiers, tribesmen, Afghulis, Maidens, and the peasants. Not a bad one, though—all of them were proven hardy and industrious, and able to fight when necessary.

"Well enough that while I would still invite you to stay," Bethina said, "I cannot imagine that we need you. Nor would you be happy, which is why I chose Farad even though you were my first man. In your soul you are a loosefoot, although an honest one."

Conan had laughed then. "Ask in Zamboula sometime, and they will tell you how honest Conan the Cimmerian was. Only do not tell them that you are my friend, or they may arrest you on suspicion of receiving stolen goods!"

Then there was the night Conan had used those thief's skills to regain his jewels from Khezal. After all, a man was entitled to a trifle of reward for a mission of such service to Turan, as well as traveling expenses to his next destination.

The reinforcements were up by then, with an array of elegant young captains who swore mighty oaths of frustration when they learned that the victory had been gained without them. It would have been as much as the Cimmerian's life was worth to remain in the camp long, and Khezal had not dared even meet him.

But Sergeant Barak had told Conan which tent was now Khezal's, and

when Conan slipped into it that night, it was most scantily guarded. Moreover, the purse contained all the jewels but three, as well as a handful of gold coins and a silver-chased dagger that had not been there before.

Khezal still knew what he was about. Conan hoped that this continued. Yezdigerd might be more formidable a foe with men like Khezal serving him, but without such wise heads, he would be a rampaging monster equal to the Lady's Mists of Doom.

Conan laughed again, in his usual harsh way, at the idea of his wishing Yezdigerd any kind of good fortune. Then he prodded his mount to a canter. It was time to be off to Koth and whatever fortune its brewing wars might bring him.