

CONAN AND THE GODS OF THE MOUNTAIN

by
Roland Green

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THE DRAGON OF THE CAVES

It came—another screaming, thundering challenge. The echoes had not begun to die when it charged. Like a heavily laden ship in heavy seas, it labored through the fungi, trampling some, shredding others. It held its head low, horns thrusting forward like the ram of a galley. Valeria remained still as the beast surged between them.

In the next moment, Conan shot forward like a stone from a sling. His hands gripped the upper horn, and he vaulted clear over the beast's muzzle, aiming for its neck...

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BY

ROLAND GREEN

TOR™

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Cover art by Ken Kelly

Maps by Chazaud

A Tor Book

Published by Tom Doherty Associates, Inc.

175 Fifth Avenue

New York, N.Y. 10010

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ISBN 0-812-51414-9

First edition: May 1993

Printed in the United States of America

0987654321

**CONAN AND THE
GODS OF THE**

MOUNTAIN

Prologue

The hunter was of the Leopard Clan of the Kwanyi. He had been born with eyes and ears almost as keen as those of the clan totem. He had sharpened both further by many years spent in the forests between the Gao River to the west and the forbidden city of Xuchotl to the east.

Neither eyes nor ears now told of any menace close to him. Nor was it likely that this stretch of the forest held any. It was near the foot of Thunder Mountain itself. The hunter had learned its paths and streams, its drinking holes and fallen trees, even before his manhood ceremony.

Yet the hunter fled as though all the kin of the dragon he had found in the forest near Xuchotl were ravening on his trail.

He had kept up this pace every waking moment for three days now. He had run until he could neither run, walk, nor stand, only fall senseless to the ground and sleep like a serpent with a pig in its belly. Then he would wake, to drink of the nearest clean water and run once more.

The pace had taken its toll. His dark skin was so caked with dirt that the hunter's tattoo of a leopard's paw on his right shoulder and the warrior's tattoo of a spear on his breast had all but vanished. Only the clan scarifications on both heels remained visible, to mark him and his footprints as of the Kwanyi.

His breath came in rasping sobs. His eyes stared ahead, next to blind, so that from time to time, a dangling vine slapped his skin. Once a stub of branch tore away his loinguard, leaving him to run on naked save for anklets of sodden feathers and the spear in his hand.

He could have run faster without the spear, for it was the stout weapon of the Kwanyi, a man's length of ironwood sapling with a triangular iron head as broad as a man's hand. Yet that thought never entered his mind. While he bore the spear, no warrior of the Kwanyi could doubt his courage.

The end of the hunter's run came suddenly, in the form of a jutting root. It caught his ankle, and even above the rasp of his tortured lungs, he heard bone snap. Then pain struck him twice, once as his head knocked against a rotten stump and once in the ankle as sundered bones cried out.

The hunter lay still until the pains eased and he knew that he would not at once become senseless. That would be death. This part of the forest held few dangers for a healthy hunter with both wits and weapons. It was otherwise for a man lying unaware of his surroundings.

When he dared move his head, the hunter rolled over and looked at his ankle. It was already swelling, and the pain was a spear of fire thrust up his leg. He would not be walking on that ankle again before the rains came—or ever if the God-Men of Thunder Mountain did not give him their healing. Poultices, purges, and the hands of village wise-women could do little against such ruin to bone and muscle.

In the next moment, the hunter began to doubt that he would even live to be spurned by the God-Men. Where he had seen only vines and thick-trunked trees, four men now stood. Each carried a spear; one carried a bow as well. Their loinguards, headbands, anklets, and tattoos alike named them warriors of the Monkey Clan.

This did nothing to raise the hunter's spirits. Chabano, Paramount Chief of the Kwanyi, was himself of the Monkey Clan. He would not have been chief for twelve years had he allowed his clansmen to feud at will with the Leopards, the Spiders, or the Cobras. Yet he had been known to turn a blind eye when those clans suffered some small hurt—such as the disappearance of a hunter whose fate neither gods nor men could learn.

The hunter twisted himself about again, ignoring the pain in his head and ankle as he drew up his legs and raised his spear.

"Ha, what have we here?" the tallest of the four Monkeys said. "One of the Little Cats, it seems."

The hunter bit back a reply of equal sharpness, on the order of "Speak for yourself, Gelded Baboon." It would be time to seek an honorable death when he had told the four warriors where he had been and what he had seen there.

"Brothers—" the hunter began.

Spear-butts thudded on mossy ground. "No brother to you," one of the spear-wielders growled.

"Chabano says otherwise," the hunter replied, then started his story before anyone else could find insults. He began with finding the dead dragon outside Xuchotl, slain by no cause the hunter could discover.

That gained him the tallest Monkey's attention. "There have been tales of a dragon in that part of the forest. Yet there are more tales that say nothing can kill a dragon. Perhaps the cause you could not discover was

old age, or a bellyache!"

"Listen to the rest of what I have to say, then think that if you wish," the hunter said. "I will say only what I saw, and that as swiftly as I can."

The hint for silence was not lost on the Monkey leader. The next time one of his warriors tried to interrupt the hunter, a spear-butt came down sharply on the man's toes. A glare cut short his muttered ill wishes, and allowed the hunter to continue.

He told of wondering if accursed Xuchotl might be safe to approach, with its guardian dragon dead. All life seemed to have fled the city—human life, at least. He spoke of an open gate through which the jungle was already creeping, to claim Xuchotl the Accursed for its own.

"How far did you go?" the leader asked.

"Not as far as I wished," the hunter admitted. "I, too, had heard the tales of the fire-stones within the city. I sought them and found—" He swallowed. "—I found that Xuchotl's curse had at last destroyed its own people."

He spoke of the bodies of men and women slain no more than a handful of days before. Some bore the wounds of human weapons, swords and spears and knives, or even of teeth and nails. Others seemed to have been struck by lightning, and this in an underground chamber where no lightning could reach save by sorcery.

"It was then that I knew Xuchotl was still accursed, and that I might join the dead if I stayed longer within its walls," the hunter concluded. "I ran from the chamber and from the city. Yet as I ran, I saw that others had come forth by the same gate not long before."

"The slayers of the folk of Xuchotl?" It was the man who had been silenced who spoke. Now his tone held respect and curiosity, as well as more than a little fear. The hunter's pleasure at having won over his listeners almost made him forget the pain in his ankle.

"That I do not know. I can only say that one was a giant, another as large as a common warrior of the Kwanyi. Both seemed well-laden, and both wore boots."

The Monkey warriors stared at one another, then at the jungle around them. It seemed to the hunter that he could see into their very thoughts as he spoke.

"I think that is why the talking drums have not spoken of this. The sorcerers who ruined Xuchotl might have other enemies in our land. Warned that they were discovered..."

The leader nodded. The hunter wondered if he, too, had a throat too dry to let words pass. One of the other Monkeys loosened his drinking gourd from his belt and passed it to the hunter.

The hunter poured the ritual drops into his palm and scattered them to the earth, then drank. When his throat was fit for speaking again, he handed the gourd back.

"Brother, I hear truth in your words," the Monkey leader said to the hunter. He turned to his companions.

"Make a litter. We bear him to the God-Men. If the drums have not spoken, he must do their work, with our help."

"If the God-Men are as they say—" began a warrior.

"Guard your tongue, lest it wag you into the Cave of the Living Wind," the leader snarled.

"If the God-Men are as they say," the man persisted, "they likely enough know already."

"Then we can do no harm," the leader said. "Perhaps even a little good, by showing that we common warriors understand the evil that magic may do."

"And if—" the man began again.

"Then they have need of our help against sorcerers who can slay dragons and scour life from Xuchotl the Accursed."

This thought silenced the warrior, but did not seem to please him or his comrades. Thinking briefly upon the matter, the hunter decided that this was no shame to the Monkey warriors. The notion of sorcerers more powerful than the God-Men of Thunder Mountain did not please him either.

ONE

In the forest between dead Xuchotl and the foot of Thunder Mountain, the boot-wearers whose tracks the hunter had seen followed a game trail.

One was a woman, and no southern hills or forests had ever been birthplace to one so fair of skin and hair. She wore a shirt and trousers of silk that had once been whole and white, but were now neither. Rents in both displayed the fairness of her skin; and a rag of red silk bound up her hair. The garb, though tattered, still fitted snugly enough to display the splendor of her breasts and hips.

Her boots had the look of the sea about them. They were of supple leather, with wide-flaring tops, easily kicked off if one found one's self in the water. That they were not made for tramping game trails in the Black Kingdoms was evident by how often the woman gritted her teeth.

About her slender waist a silken sash upheld a well-used sword and two knives. One knife was a seaman's dirk, the other a keen-edged dagger whose hilt writhed with creatures out of nightmare.

The woman was tall and robustly formed, yet her companion overtopped her by more than a head, and his muscles told of a giant's strength to go with that stature. He was similarly clad, with the difference that his sword was stouter and hung from a broad leather belt, along with three knives. His hair was black, flowing freely across his broad shoulders, and his eyes were of an icy blue, with the look of the north to them.

Those eyes had been the last sight of more than a few men over the years. The tall man was Conan the Cimmerian, his companion Valeria of the Red Brotherhood. They owed their garb to having once been pirates in Baracha, and their companionship to many curious circumstances.

Most important of those was the battle they had fought for their lives within the walls of Xuchotl. It was waged against enemies both animal and human, armed with both steel and spells. In the end, it had cleansed the accursed city of the very last of its bloody, unnatural life.

It had also given each of them a dagger. Nothing else would they take from Xuchotl, knowing too many of the city's secrets to trust loot removed from its halls. Those halls reeked of blood shed and spells cast over many centuries, and terror that would echo in their green-lit vastness when the bones of the dead were dust on the floors of polished stone.

Conan had traveled in the Black Kingdoms before, if not in this jungle, then in others hardly less friendly. He feared neither man nor beast. Yet had the Kwanyi hunter seen the wanderer of Cimmeria, he would have laughed... for Conan also threw more than a few glances over his shoulder to see what remnant of Xuchotl's evil might be on his trail.

It was taboo among the Kwanyi to leave the dead in the place where they died, no matter how great the burden of removing the body. Left where the spirit departed from it, the body might be found again by that same spirit and become a *yaquele*, one of the "walking dead."

So from the time they could bear a burden, the folk of the Kwanyi learned to make litters of whatever came ready to hand. Saplings, vines, even the leaves of the smokebush, had their uses.

A litter able to bear the dead was also fit for the living who could not walk. The hunter was moving again in less time than it would have taken him to empty a gourd of beer. Two of the Monkey hunters bore him on level ground, trailed by the third, while the leader strode on ahead.

The hunter noted that the leader bore his spear in both hands, held across his chest ready to either throw or thrust. This was a hunting party, so the men bore no shields, but it seemed that the leader did not expect their visit to Thunder Mountain to be entirely peaceful.

It further seemed that he wanted their presence to be unnoticed. Twice he raised hand and spear to halt all movement. Once he used the hunters' hand signals to send them all into a thick stand of smoke-bush.

The hunter had no notion of what they were hiding from, or why, although at the first halt he heard the chatter of women and the clatter of jars in vine nets slung across their backs. No doubt it was a band of the brew-sisters, taking jars of grain to the brew-house, or perhaps beer down from it. So what made the leader as careful not to be seen by them as he would if they were a war party of the Ichiribu?

The hunter had no answer, or at least none to lift a man's spirits. He thought of reminding the leader that the God-Men might know that the hunter had asked to come to them.

Would the Monkey warriors presume to deny the wishes of the God-Men? Or were they carrying out the wishes of the God-Men by carrying him up the mountain in secret?

Valeria leaned back against a tree of a kind Conan had never seen before. Its bark was a nubby mass of red-and-white stripes, with mold and mushrooms sprouting in cracks between the stripes. It looked unwholesome to the Cimmerian's eyes, but he reminded himself that might be merely because the tree was unknown to him.

He was not without experience in the Black Kingdoms. Indeed, he had sat on a throne in them and been hailed with the praise-name of Amra the Lion. But that was farther south and west than here, not a two-day march from Xuchotl. In time, they might reach lands that Conan knew, or even realms where he was known, but they faced a long journey before they did.

Meanwhile, the Cimmerian had less knowledge than he could wish of this land and its perils. To be sure, no peril of the jungle could equal what he and Valeria had faced and survived in Xuchotl. Nor did Conan lack any woods craft or hunting skills such that might keep a man alive though he

were cast down naked in a desert.

But Valeria was like a fish out of water in this jungle, or rather, a sailor far from the sea. She would doubtless prefer the rack than admit it, but she was trusting Conan to lead them both to the sea once more.

She sighed and kicked off first one boot, then the other. Rubbing her battered feet, she looked about for a stream. None lay close, but a puddle of water from the last rain offered hope.

One slender foot was dipping toward the water when Conan laid a hand on Valeria's shoulder. "Best leave standing water alone. Those blisters might fester or draw leeches."

"They are my blisters, Conan."

"Yes, and it will be my back that bears your weight if you cannot walk. Or would you rather I left you behind?"

That was the Cimmerian's rough jest. From the way Valeria's hand darted toward her Xuchotl blade, it seemed that the jest was lost on her.

"Peace, woman. I was joking."

"Your wit smells no sweeter than the rest of you."

"Take a whiff of yourself, woman, before you complain of another's smell. Either of us walking into the Golden Anchor in Messantia would clear the place in a heartbeat."

Valeria smiled thinly and kept her feet clear of the puddle. Instead, she pulled a handful of leaves from a low-hanging branch and dipped them in the water.

"Best not do that either," Conan said. "A blind man looking at the branch could tell that people had passed by."

"And what would this blind man do with the knowledge?" Valeria snapped. At least she did not reach for steel this time.

"If I knew that, I would know which way we should go to keep him or his friends off our trail," the Cimmerian said. "It might slow us a trifle, but—"

"Would to Mitra it did slow us!" Valeria said. She looked at her boots as if they had offered her a mortal insult. "Anyone would think from the way you've been driving us along that a whole new tribe of those brown-skinned cutthroats and spellmongers was on our trail."

"I can't swear that they aren't," Conan said, then added hastily as Valeria's eyes flamed, "but I'd wager against it. If you hadn't insisted that

we search for our clothes, we'd have been out of Xuchotl—"

"If I hadn't insisted on finding our clothes—you know how I was garbed."

The Cimmerian grinned. "More sightly than you are now, I swear. Of course—"

Valeria rolled her blue eyes toward the canopy of the jungle with the look of a woman tried beyond speech and endurance. Then she sighed. "Of course it was quite unsuitable for tramping about in the jungle." That was certainly true enough, as the garb had been a swathe of silken cloth about her hips and not a rag more.

"And the folk of Xuchotl had nothing much better in their wardrobes," she added. "What else could we have done?"

"Nothing, I admit. But it took us time we could have used to put distance between ourselves and the city. We still have that to do, and the sooner, the better."

"Is that a hint we should be on our way again?"

"With you, Valeria, I can only hint. Crom alone knows what you would do if you thought I was giving you an *order!*"

Valeria rolled her eyes again, and this time she stuck out her tongue as well. But she also lurched to her feet and eased into her boots. She could not entirely stifle a gasp of pain, but Conan paid her the compliment of letting her finish the work herself.

The Cimmerian added to the curses he had already heaped on the folk of Xuchotl, this one for their wretched footgear. Only sandals—suited to their polished floors—had been in use for more years than the Cimmerian had lived. The sailors' boots he and Valeria had worn going into Xuchotl had been the best things to bring them out again.

But no one could deny that those boots were not made for walking fast and far. In another day or two, he might well need to think of finding better footgear, a hiding place where they could let pursuit pass by, or a trail over which Valeria could walk barefoot.

The Cimmerian's own soles were leather-tough and had resisted the burning sands of the deserts of Iranistan, but Valeria of the Red Brotherhood was more at home on a ship's deck. Another day or two of tramping these trails in such footgear and she might truly need to be carried.

Nor was that the only matter preying on the Cimmerian's mind. They

had taken no food from Xuchotl, fearing poison or sorcery. They would have to find victuals before long. A three-day fast was less than wise, even for the Cimmerian, when hard marching, and perhaps fighting, lay ahead.

At least he could be sure of the woman beside him. Her courage and skill with weapons she had amply demonstrated, and not only in Xuchotl. That she had survived at all for so many years in the Red Brotherhood proved her no common warrior. She might lack the Cimmerian's woods craft, but that could be learned, and *again*, Valeria's being alive at all was proof that she learned swiftly when need be.

Would she learn swiftly enough? Only the gods knew, and Conan had given up expecting answers from them in good season. A fine sword, a trustworthy companion—and stout boots—were worth all the priests' prayers that Conan had ever heard.

Ahead, sunlight broke through the forest's canopy to tint a patch of dead leaves the color of old gold. Conan shaded his eyes with one hand and stared upward. As best he could judge, it was not long past noon.

"We'll see about stopping well before twilight," he said without turning. "Sooner, if we find a good hiding place with clean water. I'll set snares, and we can forage for fruits and berries while we wait for the game to find its way to the traps. You're handy enough with knots, I trust?"

"A sailor so long, and clumsy with knots? Conan, you have seagull dung where other men have their wits!"

Yet he could hear beneath the indignation relief and gratitude. Valeria would die before admitting either, of course, so it was best if she never had to.

As for the Cimmerian, he would rather die than leave Valeria. He had snatched her from the nightmare halls of Xuchotl, saving her from becoming a sacrifice on behalf of the aged witch Tascela. He would not be done until they reached not merely the coast, but the sight of a Hyborian ship. Between them and that happy moment lay Crom only knew what perils.

Crom only knew—and of all the gods Conan had ever heard of, the cold, grim lord of the Cimmerians was the least likely to answer the questions of mewling humans.

It took all four Monkey warriors now to carry the hunter's litter. They were well up the slopes of Thunder Mountain, although not on any trail the hunter remembered. This proved little, as he had been this far up the

mountain only four times in his life, for ordeals and ceremonies that demanded the presence of God-Men.

He still would have gladly walked, even with the help of a staff, or with a *tuqa* leaf to ease the pain of his ankle. He cared little for the sweat and sore muscles of the Monkey warriors, but he cared very much about not being helpless. He thought of asking for the staff and a wad of the painkilling leaves, but one look at the grim face of the Monkey leader slew that thought at once. The Monkey warrior might have been the image of a *yaquele*, save for the sweat flowing down him.

Also, the hunter knew he could not walk far even with such aid without risking damage to his ankle beyond the powers of the God-Men to heal. The Kwanyi had small use for a hunter who could no longer hunt. He would be as a child so young that he had no right to anything—not even to food should it grow scarce. The worst that the God-Men or the Monkey leader—even Chabano himself—might do would be swifter, less painful, and more honorable than such a fate.

The hunter lay back and closed his eyes. Presently he felt the soft, cold touch of mist on his cheek and heard the cry of the mountain eagle as it soared in the chill sky found only above the tree line.

Conan's long arm whipped the sling up and over. At the high point of its arc, the slung stone leaped across the little stream and into the monkey-laden tree on the other side. The monkeys' chattering turned into shrieks of rage and fear. They scattered, leaves, twigs, and birds' nests tumbling in their wake.

One monkey neither cried out nor fled. Struck a deadly blow by the stone, it toppled from its branch, bounced from a second, then stuck firmly in the crotch of a third. From ground to the dead monkey was the height of six men taller than Conan.

The Cimmerian cursed the whole race of monkeys and the inventor of the sling. Then he saw that Valeria was kicking off her boots.

"Guard my back, Conan. I will have our dinner down in a trice."

Warned of leeches, Valeria leaped the stream, though Conan saw her wince at the pain this gave her feet. Then she was climbing the tree with almost the agility of the vanished monkeys, in the manner Conan had seen on the Black Coasts—body and legs at nearly right angles, arms gripping the tree as if it were a lover, well-formed hindquarters in the air.

She moved surely, fingers and toes seeking out the tiniest rough patches

in the bark. The angle of the trunk was just enough to allow her to climb as she did, and it was not long before she reached the monkey. A slap to the branch did nothing; the branch was too thick. Valeria climbed another arm's length, crawled out onto the branch, and pushed the dead monkey off.

It thumped into a patch of ferns. Conan crossed the stream, thrust his sword into the patch, and withdrew it with the monkey spitted on the point.

"What is there to make you uneasy?" Valeria called.

"In this jungle, less than ferns can hide serpents. An asp bite won't kill as fast as the Apples of Derketa, but it's just as sure."

"You, Cimmerian, are as heartening as a priest of Set preparing me for sacrifice."

"Don't kill the bearer of bad news, good lady. It was not *my* advances that drove you from Sukhmet, nor my idea that you should flee into this jungle."

Perched where she was, Valeria could not draw her dagger. Instead, she made a face to frighten trolls and reached about her for something to throw. Finding nothing, she suggested that the Cimmerian harbored unlawful passions for sheep, then started back down.

She took the descent with more care and bent over farther—too far, as she learned, for her trousers. There was a sharp ripping sound, and Valeria suddenly had nothing between her rump and the jungle air.

She finished the descent with as much dignity as she could manage, then hastily backed against the tree. Her face dared Conan to so much as smile. He controlled the urge to roar with laughter with some difficulty.

"Thank you, Valeria," he said when he could trust his voice.

"You are welcome, I suppose," she replied. "A tree is not so far different from a mast, and I have been climbing those since before I was a woman." She glared at him. "Or do you think I was foolish, only to prove I could haul and draw my share?"

"I said nothing."

"Conan, you can say more with a moment's silence than most men can with talking from sunrise to nightfall." She glanced at the monkey. Its dead eyes stared back at her, and she looked away.

"If you will make the fire, I will skin it. I doubt it much differs from a fish."

"It does, but there'll be no fire."

"No... *fire*?" She said the word as if it were a solemn curse.

Conan shook his head. "We've nothing by which to strike a spark, nothing to burn if we struck it, and no knowledge of who might see the fire or smell the smoke."

"Eat the monkey raw?"

"Not uncommon in these lands. Monkeys eat much as we do, so their flesh is commonly wholesome."

"But... *raw*?"

"Raw."

Valeria gagged, but there was nothing in her stomach to come up. She leaned against the tree and braced one hand against it.

"If I had known that, Conan, I'd have left your cursed monkey for the kites and the ants!"

"Not wise, Valeria. Go hungry too long and the kites and the ants'll make their meal off of *you*."

This time she did bend over, heaving until her face was pale. Then she remained kneeling, sweat-sodden hair veiling her. Conan gently lifted her to her feet.

"Come, Valeria. Find somewhere to sit, and I will do the honors with a knife. I know which parts taste best uncooked, and I'll also do better work with the skin."

"The skin? Oh, to wear." To Conan's relief, she no longer seemed mazed in her wits.

"Just so, unless you'd rather walk bare-arse all the way through the jungle—"

She threw a stick at him.

The hunter knew that the voices he heard above him were those of the God-Men. In the last corner of his mind that remained human, he knew he should be afraid.

He was not, although he did remember having been afraid when the Monkey warriors carried him up the last few paces of the hill to the God House. The door of the house was of ironwood logs, planked with slabs of mahogany, and on the planks was painted the crimson-and-sapphire

spiral of the God-Men.

The fear had gone briefly when the door opened and only common men came forth, in loincloths and headdresses dyed with the same spiral. They had lifted the hunter's litter and borne him within the God House, leaving the Monkey warriors standing in the evening rain.

Then the hunter had not only been unafraid; he had been ready to laugh... at the disappointment on the faces of the Monkey warriors. No doubt they had dreamed of being greeted as heroes.

It was when he saw the first of the God-Men that he was again afraid, but not for long. The eyes of the God-Man were entirely white, like those of a man struck blind with the eye-rot and doomed to be cast into the forest for the beasts to devour if no one would feed and shelter him.

Yet the God-Man moved as surely as if he could count every leg on an ant in the dimmest corner of the chamber where the hunter lay. He wore only a loinguard that might have been of snakeskin, figured in hues of rose and vermilion.

He carried in one hand a staff taller than himself, crowned with a golden spiral, and in the other hand, a gourd. A pungent odor rose from the gourd, sour, sweet, and sharp all at once.

Without letting go of the staff, the God-Man knelt beside the hunter and motioned that he should sit up. This the hunter did, and at once the gourd was thrust to his lips. The taste of the brew within was so vile that he wanted to spit it out. When he found himself swallowing, he wanted to gag; when the brew reached his stomach, he wanted to spew.

Then it seemed that he was no longer tasting something vile and tainted, but beer of the most cunning brewing from the best grain and seeds. It went straight to his head as such beer often did, and he no longer felt pain, not even in his foot and ankle.

He was not wholly at ease over this; the ankle had grown swollen, the flesh turning pallid and noisome matter oozing from it. It should have been hurting as if hot irons were at work upon it.

Yet it did not, and soon he was walking whole and hearty through the nightmarish halls of Xuchotl. He was not afraid, for the God-Man was with him and the magic in the staff would stand against any evil there, living or dead. As he walked, he told the God-Man all he had seen or guessed, and it seemed that the God-Man heard every word and planted it in his memory like a seed in a garden patch. In time, they came out of Xuchotl the same way they had entered, and walked into the jungle. The

walls of the evil city faded into a green mist, and when the mist cleared, the hunter knew he still lay in the God House.

But his ankle *still* did not hurt.

It did not hurt even when the God-Man made a series of intricate motions over the hunter's body with the staff. Was it only a fever-fancy, or did the golden spiral of the staff seem to whirl, like a swirling eddy in a stream?

No matter. When the God-Man was done, the hunter found that he could rise and walk. He did so, and followed the God-Man where he was bidden, out of the chamber and down a long passage that seemed carved from living rock. The heads of the totemic animals of each clan of the Kwanyi hung thick on the walls. The hunter saw that where the rock showed, it was painted in colors for which he did not wish to find names, let alone utter them.

Then they passed a wall of rocks that seemed bound together more by magic than by mud. Beyond lay a chamber so vast that the hunter could barely make out the ceiling, and could not see the far wall at all.

As for what lay below, after one look, he turned his head away. It was not fear of the swirling smoke or what it might conceal. It was only that in his heart he knew it was taboo for him to gaze upon that smoke, and worse than that for him to see what the smoke hid.

The God-Man pointed to a seat carved from the rock at the very lip of the ledge where the hunter stood. The hunter sat down, dangling his legs over the abyss. From above, he heard more voices, and then he was alone and the voice of the God-Man who had led him there joined the others.

They chanted in a tongue the hunter did not know and beat on a drum that sounded unlike any he had ever heard. Or was it not a drum but their staves pounding on the rock floor? If those staves were shod with iron, they might sound much like that, striking the living rock—

The smoke reared up in a wall before him, like a cobra ready to strike. Indeed, it spread out in such a likeness of a cobra's head that the hunter wanted to cry out.

I am not of the Cobras. I am of the Leopards. Send a leopard for my spirit.

He knew in the same moment that he would not speak, nor would it matter if he cried out to all the gods of his people. This was a place where mere mortals were impotent in the face of the older powers under the command of the God-Men.

Even then, the hunter did not fear. Nor did he fear when the smoke swirled around him and the scream of a mighty wind tearing at the treetops came with it. He felt himself lifted as gently as a babe in a sling on its mother's breast.

Then the smoke drew back. The hunter faced crimson-and-sapphire light, swirling like the smoke. He saw the light rise around him, taking away his sight, and all of his other senses as well. He never knew the moment when the life was sucked from his body and only an empty husk remained in the stone seat.

"What was that?" Conan muttered. He thought he had spoken only to himself, but Valeria was more wakeful than he had known.

"I heard nothing," she said. She rolled over and tried for the tenth time to find a spot where a root of their sheltering spicebush would not dig into her flesh.

"Ugh," she said. "The planks of a ship's bed are down cushions compared to this jungle."

Conan held up a hand for silence, and although Valeria looked sulky, she obeyed. The Cimmerian waited until he was sure that whatever had reached him on the night breeze would not come again.

"It may have been nothing. But I thought I heard... well, if a spell of evil magic made a sound, it might have been like that."

Valeria sat up and her shirt slipped from her shoulders. She ignored the display of her magnificent breasts and made several gestures of aversion.

"Are you a spell-smeller, as we call them at home?" she asked.

It seemed to Conan that she would not much care for any answer he might give. In truth, he also would be happy if he had not suddenly gained the power to detect magic. That was almost magic itself, and Conan loathed the idea of finding it within himself.

The Cimmerian had fought more sorcerers and wizards than he had fingers and toes. But when he had an honorable choice, he gave the whole accursed breed a berth many leagues wide.

"I've never been one yet," Conan said. "I'd as soon not be one now. Likely enough it was just some trick of the wind. I've been away from these lands for so long that I may not remember all that I thought I did."

Valeria had the look of one who doubts she is hearing the truth, but the Cimmerian's blue eyes were steady and he smiled. After a moment, the

Aquilonian woman smiled back, turned on her side, and lay down. The display of breasts now gave way to a display of well-rounded buttocks.

Conan had no eye for them. He sat cross-legged, sword in his lap, waiting with the patience of one who has watched a Zamboulan counting house for three days to learn the comings and goings of its watchmen. He also waited with more knowledge of the jungle than he had admitted to Valeria. Nothing in nature had made that sound, and what was not in nature was, more often than not, dangerous.

In time, Valeria's breathing steadied as she slipped deep into sleep. Conan's breathing also slowed, until he might have seemed an iron statue in the jungle night. Only the relentless flickering of his eyes about him betrayed life.

Whatever stalked them would gain no help from him in its quest, and only sharp steel if it found them.

TWO

Seyganko, son of Bayu, was not the swiftest, strongest, or tallest of the warriors of the Ichiribu. He was the best swimmer, which was not a small matter in his people's wars against the Kwanyi.

He was also a longheaded sort of man, in spite of his lack of years. He thought before he used the speed, strength, and height that he had. Thus he made shrewder use of them than his better-endowed comrades.

This earned him some jealousy, and at least once a death-duel, from which he had emerged not merely victorious, but unhurt. It also earned him rather more respect from the day of his manhood ceremony to the day Dobanpu Spirit-Speaker read the signs and declared Seyganko worthy to be followed in battle.

From that day forward, Seyganko led. He always led in war when the whole manhood of the Ichiribu was called forth. He also led as often as not in raids and skirmishes, when no custom or taboo required that someone else lead.

Seyganko did not survive all this fighting as unscathed as he had the duel. No man could, against a foe such as the Kwanyi. Their Paramount Chief Chabano would have made his warriors formidable with his spear-and-shield art, even without the aid of the God-Men. With that aid, the chief might have swept the shores and islands of the Lake of Death clean of all tribes save his own, then marched downriver on a campaign of

conquest.

It was as well for others besides Seyganko that the God-Men and Chabano could seldom work together for long, and often barely spoke to one another. It was necessary at all times for the Ichiribu to know of Chabano's schemes and whether or not he was on a friendly footing with the God-Men.

So that is how Seyganko came to the western shore of the Lake of Death on the night that Conan sat keeping watch beside the spicebush where Valeria slept.

He and the four men in the canoe paddled as silently as wraiths to within a hundred paces of the shore. They drove the canoe forward with steady, practiced strokes, lifting their paddles so skillfully that no splash or drip betrayed their presence. Clouds veiled the moon, and this was not the season for the lampfish, whose glow when disturbed often betrayed canoe-borne warriors.

A hundred paces from the shore, all five men lifted their paddles as one. The canoe glided forward on its own momentum for another fifty paces. By then, its bow was sliding in among the weeds that grew so thick in places that a child might walk upon them.

Seyganko led his comrades over the side of the craft with as little noise as they had made in paddling. Gripping the sides, they kicked silently until they could sink their feet into the oozy bottom.

Each man wore only his headdress and a snake-skin loinguard, besides his weapons: a club or a trident, a knife of stone chips set in wood, and a net. Each also wore a generous coating of rancid fish oil. Its reek made any except the Ichiribu gag. It also hid the odor of living flesh from the small fish known as the eunuch-maker which swarmed along the shores of the Lake of Death.

"Remember," Seyganko whispered, "we need no women prisoners. If they flee, do not chase them."

"And if they stay?" one warrior asked with a grin that showed even in the darkness.

"Remember, too, that a man taking a woman turns his back on the world," Seyganko said.

"*Ho*—" the largest of the warriors said. "You need not think where to find your next woman, Seyganko. Not when—"

"Hold your tongue, Aondo," a third man said. "Or if Seyganko does not challenge you, I will. You are jealous as well as foolish."

Seyganko could add nothing to those words of wisdom, although he knew that his betrothal to the shaman's daughter Emwaya had indeed aroused much jealousy. Emwaya was the finest woman of the Ichiribu and deserved nothing less than their finest warrior, but not all men saw that as clearly as she did.

The young chief vowed to look to his back when the huge Aondo was near, then crept to the left to his chosen hiding place. The other warriors followed, with only the faintest rustling of the damp grass and the soft *chrrr* of insects to mark their passage.

They had been in hiding barely long enough for the grass to rise again when they heard voices and footfalls on the trail. As was most often the case, the sounds were those of women and men together— warriors guarding a band of women, taking food and other comforts to the camp where the Gao River flowed out of the Lake of Death.

The Kwanyi also kept warriors in the south, guarding their herdlands and grain fields on the other side of the lake. Chabano would gladly have kept much more strength there, to raid through the pass into the riverlands beyond the mountains. That the Ichiribu ruled the Lake of Death with their canoes stood in his way and made his hatred for them burn like a live coal.

Now someone among the Kwanyi on the trail, wiser than his fellows, called for silence. But he called for it in a voice as loud as the others'. Seyganko's keen ears let him measure the distance to the speaker almost as if he had stretched a length of vine between them. If the enemy advanced another twenty paces farther, they were as doomed as a dog in the jaws of a leopard.

The Kwanyi advanced that distance, and Seyganko let them go another twenty paces before he put the bone whistle to his lips and blew. If the women could run in either direction up the trail, there would be fewer of them at hand to distract men like Aondo.

The high-pitched shriek of the bone whistle silenced human foes and jungle creatures alike for a moment. In that moment, the five Ichiribu warriors leaped from their hiding places and flung themselves at their enemies.

Seyganko had just enough time to see that none of his comrades were holding back before he faced two men. Both had the heavy hide shield and three spears Chabano had given each of the Kwanyi. On open ground, by daylight, they would have been the Ichiribu warriors match, and even now they were no foe to despise. It was not in Seyganko to despise any foe, for

which reason he still lived and his foes mostly did not.

He feinted with his club to draw one man's shield up, then flung his net over the top of the other's shield and pulled hard. The spiked weights on the edge of the net caught in both flesh and hide. The man howled and stumbled forward, his shield dropping until it no longer protected him.

This time, Seyganko's stroke with his club was no feint. It splintered the man's wooden headdress and the skull beneath it. Instantly Seyganko whirled to stamp on the shaft of a spear thrust at him by the second warrior, then closed until his chest was hard against the man's shield.

The warrior was strong; he pushed hard, flinging Seyganko backward. Seyganko pretended to lose his balance and fall on his back. The warrior charged forward, his second spear poised to thrust downward.

It thrust, but struck only grass and earth. Seyganko had rolled sideways, and as he rolled, he lashed out with both feet. The warrior stumbled, abandoning his spear in a fight for balance, and had no attention to spare for Seyganko's club. Sweeping in a vicious, low arc, the club darted under the shield and crushed a knee.

The man reeled again, and this time there was no regaining his balance. Seyganko himself was in behind the shield, and a moment later the shield fell as the arm holding it shattered under another blow of the club.

With no foes ready to hand, Seyganko could spare attention for his comrades. It was hard to pick them out from among the mass of screaming, fleeing Kwanyi women and bearers. Most of them were, as he had hoped, running off inland. Not a few of the Kwanyi warriors were following.

Seyganko called the spirits of his ancestors to curse those Kwanyi cowards. Or were they cowards? Might they not be obeying the commands of Chabano, who could have guessed that such Ichiribu raids had as their purpose the taking of captives ?

Seyganko added Chabano to those he cursed. The enemy chief was shrewd enough to be dangerous even when he could hold few secrets. If he could teach his warriors to prefer flight to capture, he might keep many of them, and each one deadly to the Ichiribu.

An outcry like that of mating leopards returned Seyganko's attention, to the trail. A spear's length away, Aondo had a woman backed against a tree. He had jerked her waistcloth from her and was now stuffing it into her mouth. And just as he had been warned not to do, he had turned his back on all else but the woman. A Kwanyi warrior lying bloody on the

ground rolled over, gripped a spear, and thrust upward.

The thrust failed to be deadly, because at the last moment, Seyganko tapped the warrior lightly with his club. The spear's point sank only a thumb's width into Aondo's buttocks. He leaped into the air with a cry more of surprise than of pain, clapping a hand to his wound.

One hand was not enough to hold the woman. Disdaining any thought of garbing herself, she fled into the night. Aondo started in pursuit, dashed head-on into the shield of a Kwanyi warrior too surprised to raise a spear, and found himself in a bare-handed fight for his life.

Seyganko snatched up the fallen spear, the only weapon that could reach the pair in time. It was the kind of weapon ill-balanced for throwing; he could have done better with a fishing trident. But his arm was strong and his eye was true. Also, he did not need to kill.

The spear drove through the Kwanyi's thigh with such force that the point burst out on the other side. The man howled as if stung by fire ants and flung Aondo away. Seyganko closed the distance to the man, gripped the spear-shaft with one hand, and swung his club with the other. The man toppled, Seyganko jerked the spear loose, and Aondo regained his wits enough to start bandaging his prisoner's thigh with the fallen waistcloth.

With two captives who would live until Dobanpu could speak to them, the raid was already a victory. Seyganko blew the whistle again and promised the spirits a generous sacrifice when the other men of his band answered.

They not only answered, they came swiftly, and with two more prisoners, one of them a woman who seemed not unwilling. She was hardly more than a girl, the tattoos of womanhood barely healed on her arms and throat. She wore nothing but those tattoos and a feather that was bound into her hair behind one ear.

Aondo had already plunged into the water to bring the canoe in close enough to allow the lifting of the senseless captives into it. He seemed to wish to stay as far from Seyganko as possible.

The canoe rode noticeably lower in the water when the last captive was aboard. Seyganko looked at it, seeking to keep doubt off his face. The next time he led such a raid, he vowed, there would be a second canoe lying off, to bring help if needed, and to carry captives. As it was—

"We have no need of you," he told the girl. "Take a garment from one of the dead and rejoin your people."

The girl's face twisted in horror and rage, and for the first time, Seyganko had a clear look at her tattoos. They were none he had seen before among Kwanyi women.

"You are not of the Kwanyi?" he asked.

The girl seemed to understand nothing except the last word, but at that word, she made a gesture none could mistake. If all the Kwanyi in the world had their hearts eaten by leopards and the manhood of all the warriors devoured by jackals, it would gladden her heart.

Seyganko decided that the girl could come after all. He would not have on his spirit the memory of leaving her to the vengeance of her captors.

Also, she was rather more comely than most, although far from equal to Emwaya. It would not please Emwaya if he kept the girl himself, but the Spirit-Speaker's daughter had spoken of needing a new maidservant. The girl would do well enough for that, and in time she could be dowered and offered in marriage to a warrior who might not otherwise be able to offer bride-price.

He motioned toward the canoe. The girl looked at the water, no doubt fearing what it might hide. Then she looked back at the land, and her face showed far more fear of what might wait for her there. She splashed into the water, arose dripping, and leaped into the canoe so eagerly that she nearly capsized it.

The canoe remained upright, however. It even remained above water after Seyganko climbed aboard with the care of a woman sewing bark for a headdress. With no need for silence, the paddles were swiftly at work, and the laden craft was soon well away from shore.

By then, the warriors were beginning to babble in triumph and relief. All except Aondo. He sat amidships, wielding his paddle with the best but saying no more than did the senseless captives lying in the slimy water in the bottom of the boat.

That sight made Seyganko uneasy, and to hide this, he gave only short answers to his comrades. They were halfway back to the island before he could bring himself to join in the banter. Even then, it was mostly out of prudence; too long a silence and his warriors would think he was displeased with their work this night. This would shame and anger them, until they might be less willing to follow him. Leave the loyal unrewarded for long enough and there would be no more loyal warriors. Then such as Aondo would have their moment—nor would they likely be honorable enough to offer an open challenge.

"*Ho*," Seyganko said. "I have never seen the women run off like that. Do you suppose it was catching sight of Aondo that drove them away?"

"If so, I will go without my loinguard next time. They will run *to* me then, not from me," Wobeku the Swift said. He patted the girl on the shoulder, and did not appear to notice that she stiffened at his touch.

Seyganko hoped that her time among the Kwanyi had not turned her witless. Emwaya would have enough to do, tending her father after he had worked his magic on the captives. She would not thank her betrothed for casting the girl at her hut door like an abandoned puppy—and when Emwaya was not grateful, Seyganko and half of his tribe knew it!

Valeria awoke from a pleasant dream of being once again aboard a ship at sea. The touch of the Cimmerian's mighty hand on her shoulder was an intrusion. She wanted to shake it off, go back to sleep, and try to find the dream again.

Instead, she put the memory of sun-dappled water and a salt-tangy breeze from her and sat up. She saw Conan's eyes roving and knew that she was still as near to unclothed as made no difference.

A brief pass of her fingers through her hair told her that comb and brush would have been useless even had she possessed either one. A stout knife, or perhaps a small ax, would be needed to reduce her hair to order.

"Are you well, Valeria?"

"Awake and ready to take my watch, Conan. Is that not well enough?"

"If you doubt—"

"I do not doubt my fitness to mount guard. I may doubt your reasons for wishing me asleep and helpless."

Even in the darkness, she could see Conan's massive shoulders quiver as he tried not to laugh. She realized that in truth she had been sharp-tongued with little cause... and this in reply to an offer made out of kindness.

Or was it kindness? Valeria had not risen as high as she had in the ranks of the Red Brotherhood without knowing much of the ways of intrigue between men and women, even when the prize was no more than bedsport. When the prize could be gold enough to buy a ship, or fifty women, the intrigues soon grew bloody, and those who did not learn swiftly, died— as often as not, anything but swiftly.

One thing she had learned: a man who offered to spare a woman her share of needful duties was apt to have a price in mind for this favor. It

was a price she had no mind to pay to the Cimmerian.

Unless he was unlike other men? She had truly met none like him—so far from home, yet seemingly equal to any danger, as if he were at home everywhere. Which was perhaps not far from the truth, if half the tales he told were so.

No. In such matters, the Cimmerian would be as other men. Unless he was a eunuch, and Valeria was quite sure he was nothing of the kind. The witch Tascela had made that plain enough; she would never have pursued a eunuch as she had pursued Conan.

Valeria stood up, which did further mischief to her trousers. She looked down at herself in disgust, then wrinkled her nose at the odor of the monkey's hide.

"How long will it take that hide to be fit for a garment?"

"In this damp heat, curing goes slow. We might have to take it with us, let it cure on the march. Unless we can find a salt lick—"

Valeria spat, not quite hitting the pegged-out monkey hide. Then she peeled off her trousers and shirt and stood nude for a moment while she arranged the shirt into a loincloth.

"There," she said. "If we'll be in the forest for the most part, the trees will guard my skin."

She could not mistake the admiration in Conan's voice and eyes. "There are insects as well as sun, Valeria."

"What of the spicebush? I thought you said the berries kept away both fliers and crawlers."

"Rubbed on your skin, yes, it does. But it brings some folk out in blisters."

"Better blisters than insect bites everywhere," she said.

Conan shrugged. "Your choice, woman. Make yourself a smelly armful, for all that I care. Best be about it quickly, though. I'd like a trifle of sleep after you're done."

Valeria wished that Conan had not seemed quite so determined not to embrace her. She remembered the moment of their final victory in Xuchotl, when his massive arm's around her had seemed not only proper, but pleasant.

If a time like that ever came again, it would certainly not come tonight. She began plucking berries, crushing them and rubbing the juice on her skin, not excepting those parts of her body that would be guarded, she

hoped, by the shirt-turned-loincloth.

Exposed to the air, the juice of the spiceberries stank like an untended midden. It certainly kept both flying and crawling creatures from her, though. It also stung like bees on her blistered feet, then swiftly soothed them.

By the time she had garbed herself as best she could and sat down, Conan was lying under the bush. There was barely room for him; his feet thrust into the open at one end and his shoulders brushed the lower branches.

A scream like that of some wretched soul being obscenely sacrificed brought Valeria to her feet. The loincloth nearly parted company; she ignored it and drew her sword.

The scream came again, but this time a faint chattering and squeaking followed it. Some night-prowler finding prey, or perhaps a mate? Neither was any peril to her... she had seen the Cimmerian come awake in an eye blink, ready to fight a moment later. Even now his hand was on the hilt of his sword, although he had the weapon sheathed to protect it from the dampness of the jungle night.

She gazed at that massive hand for some moments, until the dream of sun and a ship at sea gave way to an image of a silk-draped couch in a perfumed chamber, with wine ready to hand—except that both her hands and Conan's were more pleasantly occupied.

Her stomach twitched, and for a moment, she feared that the monkey meat was finally going to take its revenge for her hunger. Then the queasiness passed, and her former fierce pride took its place.

She was Valeria of the Red Brotherhood; she had eaten worse than raw monkey meat and kept it down in earning her name and fortune. She would *not* let this wretched jungle defeat her, not while that cursed Cimmerian was anywhere in sight to laugh at her!

Dobanpu Spirit-Speaker had for himself room enough for half a score of families of the Ichiribu. Few among the tribe grudged it to him, for all that the land was growing scarce on the island.

No one had sweated to build Dobanpu's house; it was a cave burrowing deep into the hill at the southern end of the island. None doubted that for much of his work with the spirits—and with other beings mentioned only in whispers, if at all—he needed more space than a basket-weaver or a trident-maker. None wished, either, to see or hear much of what Dobanpu

did.

Nor did Seyganko, for all that bringing the prisoners to Dobanpu had meant a wearying journey for already tired men to the southern end of the island, then over the beach and uphill to the cave. It was as well that few knew how much of the art of Spirit-Speaking he was learning at Dobanpu's hands.

Already among the people there were mutterings that a woman such as Emwaya should not learn Spirit-Speaking, which they said was a man's wisdom. If she did, then she should not also wed a war chief, to give him her powers as any woman could if she lay with a man.

What would the wagging tongues say if they learned that Dobanpu himself was teaching Seyganko? The warrior knew it would be even harder then to avoid death-duels, or poison in his porridge.

Seyganko sat in the cave with Dobanpu and Emwaya. All three wore headdresses of feathers and crocodile teeth and amulets of fire-stones. The fire-stones pulsed like beating hearts, growing stronger each moment as Dobanpu and Emwaya chanted the spirits into them.

None of them wore other garb, save a coating of scented oil. To Seyganko's mind, such garb best suited Emwaya. She was of an age to have borne at least two children, and would doubtless bear many fine sons when she and the warrior at last wed. Now, however, her waist remained supple, her breasts high, her long legs well-muscled and strong to wrap about a man—

A thought entered Seyganko's mind.

Is this the time for such?

The thought held amusement and pleasure rather than anger. Even had Seyganko not seen the smile on Emwaya's face, he would have known from whence the thought came.

He replied as he had learned, without moving his lips save to return her smile.

It has been some while.

Dignity before the spirits!

None could mistake the source of that thought, although Dobanpu's face bore all the expression of a carved lodge mask. The two lovers instantly straightened backs and composed faces, then gave ear to Dobanpu's chant as it rose higher.

The chant was drawing echoes from deep within the nighted recesses of

the cave, far beyond the lamplight, when Dobanpu snapped his fingers at his daughter. Lithe and gleaming in the light, she ran swiftly to a niche behind her father and brought out a basket of small clay pots. The basket was of reeds soaked in spiceberry juice, the odor intended to drive insects from the herbs, dried fruits, and oils in the pots. Seyganko had no doubt of its success; it nearly drove him away from the fire.

He drew on a warrior's courage to sit cross-legged and watch as Emwaya drew forth several of the small pots, including an empty one. With pinches of herbs and fruit and a few drops of oil, she concocted a potion and handed it to her father. He dipped a finger in, then licked it off, for all the world like a brew-sister testing her beer. Emwaya smiled, and this time Dobanpu returned the smile without missing a beat of the chant.

To the rest of the Ichiribu, Dobanpu was a figure of awe, even of terror. His daughter knew him too well for that—and he knew that she knew. It was one of many reasons that Seyganko blessed whatever had contrived that he and Emwaya be matched one with the other. He need have no fear of his wife's father.

Now Dobanpu stood and spread his arms wide, then raised them high over his head. Smoke began to curl from the pot, foul-smelling and filled with nightmare shapes dancing on the remote edge of Seyganko's vision. Emwaya lifted the pot, and the warrior wanted to cry out as the shapes seemed to surround her like a hedge of thorns around a cattle pen. For a moment, she was altogether lost to sight, and to Seyganko, it seemed that even her father's face went taut.

He told himself that the deadliest of the spirits had no visible forms, that these were only little spirits of the woods and waters that Dobanpu had conjured up to reach the captive's mind. He knew he might even believe this after he saw Emwaya safe and whole.

In the next moment, she darted from the smoke and knelt beside her father. Her breasts rose and fell with quick breathing as she gripped her father's shoulder and joined her strength to his. The shapes left the smoke; now they danced in the air above the prostrate form of the Kwanyi captive on the black stone.

The man was too near death to speak, but the other captive, who had not been so badly hurt, had said he served the God-Men. He also said that the God-Men had learned something that put even their servants in fear.

He had not said much of this without some persuasion, but the Ichiribu had men and women expert in such, means. The powers of Dobanpu and

his daughter could be saved for times of greater need.

Thunder burst in the cave. The smoke vanished in a brief scream of wind. For a last moment, the smoke was so thick about Seyganko that he fought the urge to claw at it. He held his breath that he might not disturb the spirits by coughing, and his chest grew tight.

The smoke vanished before Seyganko had to breathe. So did the shapes. The warrior watched them whirl downward into the Kwanyi prisoner. Then he gripped one hand with the other so he might not make a gesture of aversion as the dying captive sat upright and began to speak.

With no voice of his own left, he spoke in the spirit-tongue, which Seyganko did not yet understand. Whatever the spirits were saying had Dobanpu's face twisting in horror, for all that he fought for self-command. Emwaya's eyes were wide, and her hand on her father's shoulder gripped so tight that her nails scored his flesh and her knuckles were pallid.

Thunder came again, this time a distant rumble. Seyganko gazed up at the ceiling of the cave because he could no longer bear to look at the captive. He saw a drop of water fall, to raise a puff of dust from the cave floor. Another drop followed it, then several more, then a steady stream.

No spirits were in that thunder. It was not the rainy season, but seldom did more than two or three nights pass about the Lake of Death without rain. Seyganko resisted the urge to leap forward and stand in the rain streaming down through the smoke hole.

It was as well that he did. Dobanpu's work was not done yet. Indeed, Seyganko could have stalked and slain a wild pig in the time the Spirit-Speaker needed to finish with the captive.

The warrior knew when the end came, though. The captive turned slowly toward Dobanpu. He took a single faltering step forward, then two surer ones before leaping at Dobanpu as would a leopard on its prey.

He never completed the leap. Dobanpu stood like the doorpole of a lodge, but Emwaya flung herself before her father. She moved so swiftly that Seyganko was barely on his feet before she and the dying, vengeance-driven Kwanyi grappled.

It was a short grapple, for all that the Kwanyi had in life been half again Emwaya's size and strength. He could not feel pain, but he could be knocked down. Emwaya sent him sprawling, then gripped one arm. He reached over with the other, groping for a handhold in her hair, meeting only the headdress.

He was still groping when Seyganko brought his club down on the

Kwanyi's already battered head. The last spirit-given life fled, and the spirits followed. Thunder rolled again as they leaped from the body and fled up the smoke hole, defying the rain.

Seyganko saw what might have been a bird with four wings and the head of a snake, or something even more unnatural. Then he saw Emwaya turn, eyes widening—and was just in time to help her catch her father as he fell, to all appearances as lifeless as the Kwanyi.

They laid Dobanpu on a bed of rushes; a raised part of the cave floor kept him safe from the growing puddle of rainwater. Emwaya drew a bark-cloth blanket over her father and signed to Seyganko that he should leave them.

Seyganko desperately wished to ask why, but the answer came in the same moment as the question. In the Kwanyi warrior, there had been no common magic. Only arts that Seyganko did not yet have might heal Dobanpu and save his knowledge for his people. Seyganko's duties now lay among the warriors, to lead them if need be, or at least to keep them silent until Dobanpu spoke again.

Seyganko turned back to make sure that the Kwanyi warrior was dead, or to bind him if life was still in him. Then he fought the urge to make gestures of aversion, or even to flee wildly to the open air.

The Kwanyi warrior was gone. Only the outline of his body in the muddy dust remained. No footprints showed his passing; it was as if he had become dust himself.

Seyganko looked at Emwaya, and she glanced up from her father long enough to shrug. *When I know, I will tell you* was in that shrug, and also the pride he knew so well.

I will come when I am needed, Seyganko replied.

He thought he saw her smile as he backed out of the cave. He would rather not have gone at all. Leaving Emwaya there with what had stolen away the Kwanyi's body was harder than leaving her in the face of a hungry leopard.

He also knew that a warrior who courts a Spirit-Speaker's daughter must learn more than most men about the arts of keeping peace with his woman.

Conan awoke to find a sharp root jabbing him in the ribs. He thought he must have rolled over in the night.

Then he reached full wakefulness and knew that the root was warm, and not as sharp as he had thought. He shifted and looked up... from the strong, shapely ankle beside him all the way along the finely turned leg, to the shirt bound as a loincloth about well-rounded hips, and onward to the rest of Valeria.

She left off prodding him with a bare toe and seemed about to smile, Then she shrugged.

"If you think I woke you up for—"

Conan was tempted to grip that ankle and see if Valeria's loincloth survived a tumble to the ground. He set the temptation aside. Valeria had belted on both sword and dagger over her new garb and looked as ready as ever to repay such a rough jest with steel.

Now and for some days to come, Conan had more need of a trustworthy comrade at his back than a woman in his arms. "You woke me because it's dawn and time we were on the march. True?"

A jerk of the head might have been a nod.

"Any visitors?"

"None I could not face myself, Cimmerian."

"Ah, so you did not slay the seven warriors. You only drained them of their power with a woman's—"

The toe jabbed hard into his ribs, and for a moment, Conan was ready to roll clear of a downward slash of her sword. Then the hand left the sword-hilt, her mouth twisted, and a giggle escaped before turning into a laugh. She sat down and began combing leaves and the odd twig from her hair.

"I've killed men for lesser jests, Conan. Remember that."

"Oh, I shall. But if you kill men for small jests, then I may as well die for the bull as for the calf."

She made a small-girl's face at him and went on combing. In a few more moments, she had done as much as anyone could without a comb, or without hacking her hair off short at the neck.

"As you say, best we were on the march." She licked her lips. "Although I would not refuse some water—"

"We'll stop at the first clear stream we find and drink our fill. If there are gourds to be had, we can hollow out a few and fill them, too. But for now, we'd do better away from here."

"You think we're being followed?"

"I've no way to know, but why make ourselves easy prey? The jungle's much like the sea—he lives longest who's not to be found where his enemies expect him."

"So wise in war, Cimmerian?"

Conan was about to make some gruff reply when he realized that there had been less than the usual mockery in Valeria's voice. He looked at her; she flushed all the way to her breasts and then began muttering curses at the lack-witted, effete fools of Xuchotl, who kept jewels and finery in plenty but not a single decent water bottle!

THREE

"Ge-qah!"

Seyganko cried the Ichiribu ritual word for death and flung his trident. It pierced the morning air, then the blue-green water of the Lake of Death.

The vine rope tying it to Seyganko's waist had run out perhaps twice a man's length when the trident also pierced the lionfish below the canoe. Instantly, ripples spread about the canoe; then bubbles and blood joined the ripples.

The lionfish rose, as long and thick as the canoe, with jaws that could, and sometimes did, swallow a child. Blood and body juices the hue of old gold gushed from the trident wound.

Those massive jaws still snapped, and teeth as long as a man's finger clanged together with a noise like a Kwanyi spear on a wooden shield. The scaly neck plates—with the look of a lion's mane, which gave the fish its name—flapped, as did the gills.

Seyganko waited until the fish's instinct to attack the first thing it saw was aroused. That first thing was the canoe, and the long teeth sank into the hard wood of the dugout. They so nearly met that the warrior knew the canoe would need patching after this day's work.

The wildly thrashing fish jerked at the rope and sent the trident handle whipping about. Seyganko ignored bruises as he raised his club, tossed it, caught it in both hands, and brought it down hard between the two plates over the fish's left eye.

"Ge-qah!"

He spoke the truth. The blow to its most vulnerable spot was death for

the lionfish. A shudder went through it from teeth to tail, and its jaws let go their grip on the canoe. Had Seyganko been fool enough to pull the trident loose, it might have slipped away into the depths of the lake and been lost.

As it was, he would have a fine trophy, and a score of the Ichiribu would feast. Any lionfish this large was not the best delicacy, but it was a menace to men; eating it would bring some of its strength and fierceness to those who ate, and avenge any it had slain.

Seyganko tied the fish to the stern of his canoe with the trident cord, sat down, and began paddling toward shore. Even his strength was not equal to bringing the catch aboard, but in water too shallow for other lionfish, it would not be attacked before he could summon help.

Seyganko paddled directly for shore, although this meant landing not far from Dobanpu's cave. He had heard nothing of the man for three days, save that he yet lived and that spirits sent by the God-Men might yet be a danger to him. For these reasons— and also, Seyganko thought, out of pride—Emwaya had nursed him herself and sent the curious about their affairs.

What she would not say to the curious, Seyganko decided, she might say to her future husband. And the lionfish was worth saving even if he learned nothing from Emwaya. Paddling around the point of the island would give other lionfish time to gather, scent the blood trail, and follow it. In strength, they had been known to attack a canoe.

It was as well that for the most part, lionfish were solitary creatures, each claiming its portion of the lake and driving off all comers save for females in the mating season. Had they commonly hunted in schools like the eunuch-makers did, they would have eaten the lake bare of all life, probably including human.

The canoe was heavy and clumsy with the lionfish trailing astern, but Seyganko's strong arms and well-balanced paddle drove it swiftly toward shore. As the sun rose, it burned off the morning mist, and soon he could see the hill rising from amid the last gray wisps. At last he saw the reed enclosure that let Emwaya draw water, safe from lionfish and crocodiles, and even allowed her to swim when the spirit took her.

Dobanpu must have healed; a dark head broke the water in the enclosure. Seyganko smiled. If Emwaya was in a good frame of mind, she might let him join her. After they swam together, the most common end was rolling together in the grass.

Then the head grew shoulders and arms, and Seyganko saw that it was

the form of a woman, but not of Emwaya. The Kwanyi slave girl was making free with the swimming place, as bare as a babe. In the light of day, and not frightened half out of her wits, she was even a greater pleasure to see than on the night of the raid.

"Where is your mistress?" he called in the True Tongue. She might hate her old masters with a passion, but she could hardly have been among them for long without learning at least a little of their speech.

The girl stood up, shook herself like a dog, then pointed toward the cave. Drops of water silvered by the morning sun sparkled in her hair and trickled down her breasts as she moved about. Seyganko would have thought her unaware of how well she appeared had he not caught a sly look from the corner of one brown eye.

He grinned. Apart from his oaths to Emwaya, which did not allow him another woman save with her permission, he doubted the wisdom of tumbling his betrothed's maidservant. He also knew a sure way of putting an end to her tricks.

"Ho! Woman of Emwaya, I have work for you." Seyganko heaved on the rope until the lionfish's tail was above water. "Come and help me haul this brute ashore!"

The girl took one look at the lionfish, another at Seyganko, then fled toward the mouth of the cave, still bare. Seyganko pulled the canoe ashore, sat down on the girl's waistcloth, and was whetting his trident with a piece of ironstone when Emwaya came down to him.

When he could free himself from her grip and let go of her, Seyganko held her at arm's length. He saw that she seemed paler and thinner than three days of any ordeal would warrant. Or at least any ordeal save one.

"Your father—"

"Dobanpu Spirit-Speaker lives. His sleep is now healthy, his dreams clean. I have fed him porridge and water, and they rest well in his belly."

She spoke as if still in a ritual, but he saw unaccustomed moisture in the corners of her eyes. He reached up to brush away the tears, and she gripped his wrists as if they were the last things between her and drowning.

"Seyganko, forgive my weakness. I did not mean you to see me this way—"

"No, you are not like that wench you have taken into your service. She meant me to see her as she was swimming."

"I thought as much when she came uphill bare. What did you say to her?"

Seyganko told the truth, and Emwaya rewarded him with a laugh that held some of her usual good cheer. "I will help you with the fish and then have words with Mokossa."

"Is that her name?"

"I think it is the name of her tribe, one living beyond the lands of the Kwanyi. She is not child-minded, but living among the Kwanyi frightened her out of most of the wits she had."

"Not so much that she cannot have eyes for a warrior, I warn you."

"Any woman with sense will have eyes for you, Seyganko. I have just told you that Mokossa is a woman of sense."

"Do you seek to flatter me, Emwaya?"

"I have done so often enough that I do not need to try again."

If she was able to banter like this, she could hardly have dire news. It was in Seyganko's mind to slip his hands under the waistcloth and undo its knot, and the spirits take the lionfish!

Yet something in her voice—

"Did your father learn anything from the servant of the God-Men?"

"I think I can do as well drawing lionfish ashore as Mokossa. Since I do not wish a sodden waist-cloth—"

"Emwaya." He held her by the shoulders, so tightly that he half feared she would slap him. "Your father brought strong spirits, and he is not one to do that lightly. *What did he learn?*"

Emwaya shuddered but did not weep or try to pull away. After a moment, she reached up and gently lifted Seyganko's hands from her bare shoulders.

"The spirits were angry at fighting the protection the God-Men put on their servants. Also, I think some of them were hurt."

Spirits could be injured, though not as easily or in the same way as men. Seyganko knew enough of Dobanpu's art to have learned that. If the God-Men had power to put that kind of guarding on their servants—

"Are they angry with your father?"

"He said he thought not. Some spirits are friends of the God-Men, others their enemies, or at least enemies of the spirits they command."

Tribal feuds among the spirits! Seyganko silently cursed the spirits, those who made them, those who served them—

"The God-Men have learned that Xuchotl the Accursed has fallen."

The words came out as if Emwaya were purging herself of something foul. Indeed, her face seemed more content, and she leaned against Seyganko and pressed her face into his shoulder. He rested an arm across her back, feeling the fine skin and the strength within, but not seeking anything further now.

"How did it fall?"

"It was hard to tell. It seems that a Kwanyi hunter was seeking game far to the east at the time the city fell. He entered unharmed, explored it, saw that all within were dead, then fled, fearing that its destroyers would come for him. The God-Men learned his tale and gave him to the Living Wind. They seek to hide this knowledge until they know what use to make of it."

If the God-Men had the wits of a leech, they would be asking Dobanpu to join his knowledge to theirs to fight whatever had the power to cast down the Accursed City. Any such being could eat the tribes of the forest as a lionfish ate fingerlings.

The God-Men lacked such wisdom, however. Even if they found it now, Chabano of the Kwanyi would not let them spoil his dreams of conquest. And Dobanpu would most likely refuse to trust the God-Men even if they and Chabano both asked for his aid. Seyganko hoped he would not have to say the last in Emwaya's hearing. She knew her father could be proud and obstinate, but she had not granted her betrothed the right to say so.

"Who else knows of this among the common folk of either tribe?"

"That, my father could not learn. Do you think the God-Men might try to keep this knowledge from Chabano?"

"It might serve them well if they could," Seyganko answered. "It is said that Chabano is jealous of the power of the God-Men and seeks to wage his wars without them. If the God-Men joined with the power that destroyed Xuchotl, Chabano would be a babe against them."

"They would be mad to think that such a power could serve them!"

"I know that a shaman can do only so much. You know that as well. Both of us learned it from your father, who was born with the knowledge." Seyganko shrugged. "The God-Men were not so fortunate."

"Curse the God-Men!" Emwaya said fervently. Then it was her hands that danced down Seyganko's back and under his garments, so that it was

not she who was the first of them unclothed.

Sun-curing would be needed to finish the work on the monkey's hide to make it a fit garment. Conan held out no great hope of that much sun and offered Valeria his shirt.

She held it against her, then laughed. "As a night-shift, I might accept it."

"My hide's thicker than yours, Valeria, and not bred in Aquilonia."

"If I've survived the sun and salt wind at sea, I'll not broil before this hide cures."

"Or rots."

"Does Crom tell you to look always for the worst, Conan?"

"Crom's not a god to tell anyone anything, at least not for the asking," Conan replied. His grim Cimmerian god was not a jesting matter for him, or for anyone else born in the Northlands, where the name was mighty.

"Is that why you're so often closemouthed?" Valeria asked. Seeing no answer forthcoming, she threw up her hands and fell in behind the Cimmerian.

They had not gone far from their night's camp before a brief but heavy shower soaked them both and left pools of clean water everywhere. They drank, then cut still-green branches from a fallen tree with which to make staffs. With these aiding them, especially the sore-footed Valeria, they made good progress the rest of the morning.

Noon brought them hungry to the bank of a river too deep to wade. Conan studied its surface, eyeing the swirls in the murky water. He studied with equal care the banks of the river, including places where animal tracks ended in patches of churned mud and scattered leaves.

"Crocodiles," he said briefly.

Valeria glowered at the water. "I was thinking we could make a raft and let the river do the work."

"It flows south and west, which is the way we want to go. But we've no tools, and the crocs would have us off a floating log before we'd gone half a league." Conan looked beyond the banks, seeing fallen tree trunks. He saw too few for a raft, and some of those too large for even his strength to roll to the water.

"No, I was thinking we should be hunting for a meal, anyway. Share a

beast with the crocodiles, and they may give us safe passage."

Valeria shrugged. "If it works with sharks, it may work with crocodiles. But, oh, that I'd ever be ready to sell my soul for a canoe."

"Sell your body for an ax, and we'd have the canoe," Conan said, then ducked as Valeria lashed at him with a length of vine.

Hunger and the need for silence ended the banter. They found hiding places that commanded two of the low spots on the bank, where the jungle creatures came to drink. Conan suspected they might well have a long wait, as the pools of rainwater would doubtless content the beasts as well as themselves. It might be dark before the animals came, and Conan did not care to match wits with a crocodile after dark.

As a prophet, Conan failed. It was not yet mid-afternoon when a family of wild pigs came huffing and snorting through the bushes. There were five in all: an old boar, a sow, and three piglets following in the wake of their elders.

Using the hand signals of the Barachan pirates, Conan told Valeria to take the sow, or failing that, a piglet. That would do for their own food. He himself would face the boar—and any crocodile not sated with *that* much raw pork was no creature of nature.

Conan thrust that thought aside with the same distaste he felt for all wizardry. Yet he could not forget last night. Had he sensed powerful magic at work not far off?

It would not have surprised the Cimmerian to learn of such magic. The tales he had heard in Xuchotl suggested that those who built the city might have left magic, as well as stones, behind. Old, evil, tainted magic, perhaps drawing on the lore of the nightmare empire of Acheron. Even legends did not agree on how far that lore had spread, how long it had lasted, or how deep it had sunk roots into the minds of men.

Nor did legends agree on how a man became a spell-smeller—the name in the north for those who had some further sense beyond the common five—allowing him to discover the working of magic. They did not even agree that such men existed. Some said that it was only a matter of recognizing subtle changes in the natural world, changes that any spell always made.

Conan had never thought much of such arguments, and less than most of that one. If such talk could have made sorcerers forsake their craft and turn into honest men, he would have gladly joined it until his throat was dry. As matters were, he chose not to let his throat dry out in the first

place!

Now the boar was sniffing the air with the care of the scout of a host seeking an ambush. It scented nothing. The scant breeze was flowing from it toward the hunters, and both Conan and Valeria had been in the jungle long enough for its smell to partly disguise theirs.

Conan nodded, and Valeria drew her sword. It caught briefly in the scabbard, and the faint scraping as it came free made the boar raise its head. Again it sniffed the wind, and this time the sow moved to stand between her piglets and danger.

The danger that struck first was not the human hunters. Conan did not see the ripple in the stream, but he saw the dripping, tooth-studded jaws burst from the water and close on the sow.

Her squeals raised echoes and sent birds flying and monkeys leaping from every tree within a long bowshot. Valeria leaped from cover, heedless of the boar, sword slashing down at one of the piglets as they scattered.

The boar paid her no attention at first as it lowered its head and tried to gore the crocodile. The reptile, a patriarch of the breed, had flung itself so far up the bank that it could not return at once to the water. Its claws gouged mud, and its tail lashed as it tried to fend off the boar, hold on to the dying sow, and reach the refuge of the river.

At last it succeeded in all three. A bloody swirl in the water marked its escape. Valeria had just sheathed her sword in the neck of a second piglet when the boar turned on her.

Had the boar been a little quicker, the songs sung in later days about Valeria of the Red Brotherhood would have been rather shorter. But she turned, freeing her sword, drawing her dagger, and leaping aside from the boar's rush with a speed that rivaled Conan's. The Cimmerian remembered how deadly she had been in the battles in Xuchotl as her dagger slashed the boar's muzzle.

The great pig squealed in rage and pain and drew back. Its hooves churned up almost as much mud as the crocodile had. It tried to gain footing on the slippery bank for launching a charge, but again it was a trifle too slow. Conan was within sword's reach before the boar could charge. There was no subtlety or art in the way his sword came down on the boar's thick neck. Swordmasters from Zingara to Vanaheim would have cringed at the brutal strength of the blow, more suited to an executioner than a swordsman.

It did not matter to Conan who struck the blow, or to the boar, who fell

dead, or to Valeria, who found the boar lying at her feet.

Valeria turned, the battle-light in her eyes, and brushed her hair from her face. The movement of her arm lifted her breasts. Altogether she was a sight to make a man's blood seethe in his veins, the huntress among her prey, silhouetted against the sun-dappled river.

She stood so that once again Conan did not see the warning ripples in the stream. The second crocodile was as large as the first, but not as swift. Also, it exhaled a great, foul, hissing breath as it slid up the bank.

Valeria jumped to safety as the jaws thudded shut an arm's length from her leg. Not watching where she leaped, she landed on a slippery patch, reeled, and staggered hard against the Cimmerian. He clutched at her, drawing her backward with him.

His back came up hard against a red-barked tree. The tree shook and made a rumbling sound like a mill wheel. Instantly sensing a new danger, Conan stepped away from the tree, turning and losing his grip on Valeria as he did so.

The next moment, the ground vanished from under his feet. He plunged into darkness, taking with him one memory and one hope. The memory was of Valeria's horror-stricken face staring after him. The hope was that she would remember the crocodile at her back rather than fret herself about him.

Geyrus, first among the God-Men—or First Speaker to the Living Wind, as he was named in ritual—shook his staff. That was not enough to ease his wrath, so he struck the rod hard upon the silver-shot rock at his feet.

The three Cobra Clan warriors cringed, as if they expected the rock to open up at Geyrus's command and swallow them. Their eyes showed only whites, and they held their shaking hands over their mouths in the ritual gesture of supplication.

They would find no mercy from Geyrus, and deserved none.

"Six slain, three taken, and one of my handmaids as well!" he roared. He could make his voice as loud as a lion's if he chose, though not as easily as he had done in his youth. *Then* he could have brought Chabano himself to his knees with mouth-magic!

"Forgive—" muttered one of the warriors.

"There is no forgiveness for such folly!" Geyrus stormed. "Folly enough in taking her on such a journey at all. Folly ten times worse in losing her to

the lake-swimmers!"

He did not use the lion-voice this time. He needed to save his strength, and also, he did not wish all he said to be overheard.

Even in the very house of the Speakers to the Living Wind, there were those whose hearts lay first with Chabano of the Kwanyi. They would not hesitate to tell him any secret of the Servants if they thought it would earn them his goodwill.

"You are dead men," he said more softly. "Yet I am disposed to grant you as much mercy as you deserve. You may choose your death. Shall I give you to the Living Wind? Or shall I give you some other death, of my own choosing?"

The mere mention of the Living Wind made one warrior drop to his knees, a posture he would rather have died than have assumed before a human foe. Geyrus smiled tightly so as to reveal only those of his teeth that still shone white and perfect.

Geyrus understood the warriors' terror. The Living Wind played with those who came to it with unclouded minds, harassing them like a cat with a mouse. Madness and agony came swiftly, and lasted long enough to make death a craved release.

"So be it. You shall meet the fate of any cobra when it crawls too close to the leopard's cubs."

Geyrus did not produce a thunderclap as he completed the spell. The first sound the men heard was the growl as the spell-borne leopards scented prey. Then claws struck golden sparks from the stone as the leopards hurled themselves upon the warriors.

Geyrus had kept his promise. The leopards killed more swiftly than the Living Wind commonly did. Fangs tore out throats, claws ripped bellies, and screams of fear and agony echoed only briefly about the tunnels. The leopards were feeding lustily on the corpses as Geyrus dropped the stout net across the tunnel.

A time had been when he could have raised a barrier against the leopards entirely by magic. That time of youthful strength was gone, and would not come again. His best now was bringing the leopards when they were needed, and returning them when they slept, sated on human flesh.

Geyrus did not pray to any god who had a name among living men. Nor did he pray to the Living Wind—it was no god; that had been plain from the earliest days of its Servants.

Instead, he *hoped* that his not keeping the secret of Xuchotl's fall would

do no harm. It was probably a vain hope, inasmuch as neither Chabano nor Dobanpu were fools. Geyrus consoled himself with the thought that if they had been, there would be no challenge, no pride for him in besting them. Both a man's first battles and his last should be against worthy foes.

But that girl—lost! She alone would earn Seyganko the slowest death any man had ever suffered, *after* he had watched Emwaya die just as slowly. Or would it be better to make Dobanpu's unnatural daughter watch her betrothed's death *before* her own?

Time to decide when he had them both in his hands. Either way would ensure the girl's obedience for the rest of his days. The First Speaker to the Living Wind would sleep in a well-warmed bed, as befitted a victor.

The disappearance of Valeria's Cimmerian companion was swift and silent. One moment, Valeria sensed him at her back; the next moment, her fine-honed battle instincts told her that he was not.

She leaped again, nearly losing her last garment. The crocodile hissed like a pot of stew overflowing into a cook fire and wriggled forward. Its jaws—as long as a child of twelve—gaped, then shut again with a clang as if made of iron instead of bone.

Valeria knew something of saltwater crocodiles, having once anchored in a river mouth where they swarmed. She had never been so far from the sea in a land where the rivers also spawned them, but she judged this beast to be much like its seafaring cousins. It would be swift in the water, slow on land, tenacious of life, and slow of wits. Doubtless it was cudgeling those wits for some new way of dealing with her, now that its first lunge had failed.

She could be long gone from the riverbank and any danger from the crocodile if she was ready to abandon Conan to whatever fate had befallen him. *Or that he has fallen into*, she surmised, seeing as the very earth itself seemed to have swallowed him.

This thought made her next leap cautious, and she thanked Mitra when she landed on solid ground. Then she kicked off her boots. Blisters or no, she had a better feel for any surface under her—ship's deck or jungle riverbank—when she was unshod.

She drew dagger to match sword and studied her opponent. It was impossible for her to seek safety at the price of leaving Conan. Not impossible in the sense of against nature, as it would have been impossible for her to grow wings and fly—but against *her* nature and all she had lived

by since before she was a woman.

She and the Cimmerian were battle-bound, as surely as by any tie of blood or by oath sworn before a score of priests of as many gods. She would return to serving in a barber's house, or even dance in taverns, before she broke such a bond as she had with Conan.

That he desired her was an annoyance, as a fly buzzing about her head might have been. But one did not strike oneself on the head with a hammer to swat such a fly!

The crocodile hissed again and lumbered forward. Valeria shifted on nimble feet so that she could watch the whole riverbank as well as her immediate foe. The one thing she dreaded most was another crocodile. The first one would most likely be off gorging itself on the sow, but where there were two of the monsters, there could be three.

She saw no sign of another reptile, but she did see a shallow depression in the ground where the leaf mold and tangled dead vines seemed to sag. If that place had swallowed Conan, perhaps it might be persuaded to swallow the crocodile.

Then the monster lunged forward with a speed that startled her. Surprise did not slow her, or make her forget that no creature's brain can be far from its eyes.

As the crocodile lunged, Valeria leaped, and more. She twisted in midair, with the grace that had caused more than a few to throw silver, even gold her way in years past. She came down astride the crocodile's spiny back, just behind the massive neck.

Before the crocodile realized that its prey was no longer in sight, Valeria struck. Her dagger drove hard into the scaly hide, seeking a chink, sinking in deep enough to hold her. Then she lifted her sword, reversed the blade, and drove it deep into the crocodile's right eye.

The sword was awkward for stabbing, and nowhere else on the beast would its point have gained entrance. Striking where it did, it reached the crocodile's life.

The hiss turned into a screaming bellow as Valeria leaped free of the creature, as desperately as ever she had leaped from shark-infested water into a boat. The crocodile's tail thrashed wildly, splintering bushes and scoring the bark of stout trees. The legs spasmed, claws frenziedly spraying earth and leaves all over Valeria. Then it gave a final lurch, rolled over, and slammed its head down in the depression Valerian had noted before.

In an uncanny silence, the earth gaped. With a tearing of vines and a snapping of roots, the crocodile upended. For a moment, its tail waved again, as if in its final convulsion the beast was bidding farewell to its slayer. Then the crocodile vanished.

This time the hole did not. Whatever device or spell had closed it previously seemed to be exhausted. It gaped the width of a man's height at Valeria's feet. She looked down into twilight, then into a darkness as complete as the deepest abyss of the sea.

She swallowed. She could not drive out of her thoughts the notion that not even Conan could have survived such a fall... or that if he had, the crocodile might have finished what the fall began.

She would never know, however, save by going down herself and finding the Cimmerian, or his body. She refused to contemplate what she would face if he were alive but helpless from hurts taken in the fall.

"Conan," she muttered, "my life might have been simpler had you never left Cimmeria."

Yes, and doubtless shorter as well.

The voice in her mind was not altogether Conan's, but close enough to make her start.

So be it. She had been a climber from childhood, and once a sailor had said of her that she had eyes in her fingers and toes. That would help. So would a stout length of vine, or several lengths bound and braided to support her weight.

The dead vines were too rotted for such work, but there was no shortage of live ones. Valeria had her vine rope before the sun-dappling of the river had greatly changed. She finished her labors by tying a slipknot in one end of the rope, slinging her boots by their laces about her neck, and making a sword-thong of vine.

The vine would not serve well for either rope or thong as would good Shemite leather, but Valeria was no stranger to making-do. For the climb, she would use the thong to bind her sword across her back, but once on solid ground, the weapon would come into service.

She had finished all the work she could do in the gods' own daylight, on a jungle riverbank that now seemed a pleasant vantage compared to the blackness at her feet. The rest of her duty lay below.

She breathed deeply until she was as calm as could be hoped. Then she lowered her feet over the edge of the hole and began her downward climb.

FOUR

Conan's fall began with ill fortune, which swiftly changed for the better. Had it been otherwise, the stories of many men and not a few realms would have been vastly altered.

He was no spell-smeller, or he might have sensed the magic binding the ground at the mouth of the pit. Then again, perhaps not. It was old earth-magic, and the names of those who discovered it had been lost to human memory long before Atlantis was even built, let alone before the oceans swallowed it.

The art had not been lost, however. The sorcery known to the builders of Xuchotl partook of it. Nor was the doomed city the only creation to which they had turned their magical arts. Deep within the jungle they also built and wrought mighty works, at a time when the Black Kingdoms were but bands of feuding tribesmen.

It was one of these leavings that Conan had encountered. The earth gaped beneath his feet, he plunged down into darkness briefly lit from above, then continued his plunge in darkness deeper yet as the pit closed above him.

Thrice he struck earthen walls that yet seemed too solid and smooth to be altogether natural. These blows slowed his fall somewhat, but also drove the breath from his lungs. He had just regained it when he struck for a final time, where the wall of the pit had crumbled under the inexorable thrust of the roots of some forest giant. The blow took him across the chest and would have cracked, or even crushed the ribs of any lesser man.

With the Cimmerian, it drove out the barely regained breath and tossed him like a child's ball into the mouth of a tunnel entering the other side of the pit. He struck, half slid and half bounced ten paces, then lay there while earth quivered, rumbled, and fell from the mouth of the tunnel.

He would gladly have lain until his breath returned, but instinct told him that the mouth of the tunnel was only precariously bound by whatever magic ruled here. Lying thus in momentary comfort could end in swift and final burial.

Iron fingers seemed to clutch his chest as he crawled, but the sound of still-falling earth drove him onward. He was sweating with more than his exertions when at last silence fell again, broken only by his harsh breathing.

Probing his ribs with his fingers, he found nothing broken, although he would wager the price of a good inn that he would have the mother and father of all bruises by morning. His breathing had slowed, and cautiously he sat up.

Then a rumble and a series of thuds sounded from the mouth of the tunnel. They rose to a crescendo, but faded as swiftly as they came. Something large had followed him into the pit and plummeted all the way to its distant bottom, as he had not.

He told himself that the sound was too heavy to be Valeria. That kept the ill-luck thought from his mind that she would surely follow him down if she bested the crocodile. She had that loyalty to a battle comrade that defies common sense, and that Conan himself also lived by.

The mouth of the tunnel was now two-thirds blocked by fallen earth—and Conan was thunderstruck to realize that he could *see* this. He was no longer in utter darkness worthy of the deepest slave-pits of Stygia.

He turned and looked down the tunnel. It sloped away into shadow but was clearly visible for some fifty paces or more. At the very edge of the Cimmerian's vision, the walls seemed to turn from earth into stone, and carved stone at that.

Over all played a subtle light that at one moment seemed sapphire-hued, at the next, as crimson as a fine ruby. Trying to follow the changes of color made Conan dizzy, and in time he ceased his efforts. The light was magic, no doubt, and he was uneasy in the presence of magic. But he would be a cursed deal uneasier in total darkness, and that light might give him a way out of here without Valeria's risking her neck to climb down to him!

Now, if he had some way to tell her that...

Valeria knew that the air had to be cooler this deep in the earth. It only *seemed* hotter, as though she were climbing down the throat of a volcano toward the molten rock bubbling far below, ready to turn her to ashes should her grip fail for a moment.

"By Erlik's thews!" she muttered. "Forget what you've learned about not letting your fancies run wild, you silly wench, and you *will* fall."

It was not a fancy that sweat covered every bit of exposed skin, turning into slimy mud where earth had fallen on her from the walls. Her loincloth clung to her, as sodden as a jellyfish, and even her boots seemed to have become heavier with the dampness of the air in this pit.

Truth was, she had never climbed so long and with such precarious holds for hands and feet. Compared to this climb, the time she had raced a shipmate from bow to stern over the masthead on a wager was a child's game. It did not help, either, that her life had not been at stake in that race.

Groping feet touched a flatter surface. A ledge? Something besides the wall of the pit, anyway... but test it first before putting full weight on it, let alone undoing the rope from its moorings above.

"Hooaaa!" The voice seemed more a specter's than a man's as it floated up from below like smoke. Valeria's feet groped for purchase on the ledge, until at last she found a spot whereupon to stand. She left the vine rope in place, though, as she stared downward.

The mouth of the pit was now so far above her that its light barely let her count the fingers of a hand held in front of her face. Beneath, all was blackness. Or was it? From well below, on the far side of the pit, a dim glow seemed to battle the darkness, like distant fireflies on a moonless night.

Except that no firefly ever blinked in those hues of blue and red—no natural firefly, at least. But the laws of nature might not bind whatever lived down here.

Valeria shuddered. She had no more taste for magic than the Cimmerian did, if the truth were known, and for much the same reasons. Magic made honest war skills useless, and made its users more often than not as twisted as the street of her native village in Aquilonia! Tascela was the worst sorceress she had seen, which made her thank the gods that she had not seen some of the wizards Conan said he had fought.

There would be time to fret over whether Conan had been spinning tales when she knew that the voice below was his... and when she had rejoined him.

"The sea frees us," she called. It was a password of the Red Brotherhood. Only Conan in this jungle was likely to know the reply.

"The land binds us," came the reply. Valeria's knees quivered with relief, but she did not move otherwise.

"Conan! Where are you?"

"In a tunnel, beyond where you see the light. I—"

A clod of earth bounced off Valeria's head and spun away into the abyss. She looked up. Was it her fancy, or was the hole above smaller, the light from it dimmer?

The light was surely fading; her hand was now only a blurred, fingerless shape. The glow from below was holding steady, but it could not take the place of the trickle of daylight from overhead.

"Conan! Something's happening to the light. I'll try to climb down until I'm opposite you, then throw my rope across. How wide is the pit where you are?"

"Wide enough that your pet crocodile didn't stick in its gullet when you sent it down to join me," the reply came. "Best you move quickly, though, if the light's going."

She heard hints of more danger than that in his voice, and was briefly angry at his hiding the truth from her. Reason replaced anger and told her that he might not know all the truth himself. If he did, he would tell it to woman, king, or god!

The rope was near its end when Valeria found a foothold on a huge curving root opposite the mouth of the tunnel. At least she felt the bark under her feet; the light from above was almost gone. Then Conan's head and massive shoulders nearly blocked the light from the tunnel below. She saw now that the mouth of the tunnel was heaped with freshly fallen earth, and understood what Conan feared.

She had not been so desperate for silence since her brief days as a cutpurse. Even the faint hiss as the slipknot loosened and the rope came free seemed to batter her ears like thunder. The end of the rope flew past her, down into the pit; then she gripped her end and began hauling it in.

She was hauling vigorously when the rope suddenly went taut in her hands. Caught on another root, she thought. Then it began jerking up and down. Caught it was, but by something alive in the depths of the pit—and, she would wager, not by anything as innocent as a crocodile.

Valeria would gladly have faced a score of crocodiles rather than what might even now be climbing from the depths. She did not let fingers or voice shake, however, to give any hint of her fear. She flung her end of the rope across the pit, saw Conan grip it firmly, then heaved with all her strength on the bight of the vines.

For the longest moment of Valeria's life, it was an even contest which would break first—the vine or the grip of whatever lay below. Then, suddenly, the rope shot up like a flying fish. Valeria seized the free end and hastily bound it about her waist.

The rope was covered with a foul ichor that might have oozed from a vast pustule, and now she heard slobbering and gulping noises from

below. Not far below, either, and she would have to swing down to cross the pit. The root offered no foothold fit for a leap.

"Conan!" she called.

"I hear it, too. Jump, Valeria!"

She would drop no farther if she missed her jump than if she swung down, then climbed. Not as far, indeed, for Conan was drawing in the rope until it stretched taut across the gap.

Valeria braced herself, flexed her legs, pressed her hands hard against the wall, and thereby dislodged several more clods of earth. They fell into darkness, and it seemed that the slobbering and gulping grew louder yet.

The pirate woman took the deepest breath of her life, as if enough oxygen in her body would float her over the nightmare gap. Then she leaped.

She was in midair for only a heartbeat, but that was long enough for something to reach up from below and pat her. Its touch was as light as a kitten's, yet it burned like a hot iron.

Then she was on the far side, clawing up over the tumbled earth, listening to the howl of a hunter balked of prey echo up and down the pit and into the tunnel. More earth fell from the walls and ceiling. Conan dragged her the rest of the way over the pile by one arm and her hair.

In the process, her loincloth at last deserted her, and she was bare except for weapons and boots as she tumbled at the Cimmerian's feet. For once he seemed to ignore that state, dragging her upright.

"Can you walk?"

"I can run, to get away from *that!*"

The howling in the tunnel had not diminished, and now Valeria heard another fierce sound joining it.

The walls of the pit were shuddering, as she wanted to do, and she saw masses of earth the size of a man plunge past. She also heard them strike something not far below with an ugly, sodden sound.

Then the roof of the tunnel mouth joined the shuddering, and neither Cimmerian nor Aquilonian needed any further warning. They scrambled down the tunnel, slowing only when they felt stone under their feet, not stopping until they heard the rumble of great masses of falling earth behind them.

A mephitic breeze wafted from the mouth of the tunnel—or rather, from where the mouth of the tunnel had been. Whether the whole pit had

collapsed, they could not say. But the way back was now blocked by a solid mass of earth that seemed to glare at them in defiance of any puny efforts they might make to shift it and escape.

Not that Valeria had the slightest intention of returning by way of the pit, when its inhabitants might still be alive and hungry. Perhaps that wall of earth between her and them was not so dire a fate as she had thought—unless the pit creatures could carve a path through it, or they had kin somewhere in the tunnel beyond.

As to the first, the best course was swift flight. As to the second, keen eyes and keen steel would have to be enough—that, and a prayer or two, if any god could hear them from these deeps.

She pointed a bare arm down the tunnel. Conan nodded and fell in at the rear, for the moment the post of greater danger. Valeria recognized this, and also that Conan's eyes now roamed over her with concern for any hurts she might have taken.

But there was hardly a price she would not have paid to be able to climb into a hot bath!

Conan took the rear guard until they reached a place where the tunnel divided; there were no sounds of pursuit behind or of life ahead. That this was no natural tunnel was by now made plainer than ever by the remains of incredibly ancient tool marks and patches of stain and corrosion that might once have been bronze or iron.

At the dividing point, Conan examined Valeria's ankle. It showed an ugly dark mark, like the worst sort of burn, but the pain was fading and the ankle would support her weight. Like his ribs, it would slow neither weapons nor feet, depending on what seemed the best way of meeting any danger.

"Now, you *will* take the shirt off my back, or I'll know why," he said. "Garbed as you are, you'd adorn a royal palace, but I doubt we'll be finding many palaces down here. Their dungeons, perhaps, and the bones of those held in them, but little else."

"You need not soothe me, you son of a he-goat."

"Ha! You've your spirits back. Perhaps you need no clothes then, since without them, you're double-armed, steel and womanhood!"

"Give me that shirt," she snapped, then laughed loud enough to raise echoes. She looked about her while the echoes died, then almost snatched the garment the Cimmerian held out to her.

It came down to mid-thigh. Conan cut the sleeves into strips and bound them around Valeria's feet to protect the blisters until further walking toughened the skin. So clad, with her hair a tangle any honest bird would have disdained to nest in, and her boots dangling from a thong about her neck, Valeria would have been flung into the street from the cheapest waterfront tavern.

Or she would have been but for her sword and daggers—and also for the look in her eyes that said any hand touching her against her will would not return to its owner intact, if at all.

Conan needed no further warnings in that matter. Indeed, he was grateful for the skill and luck that had allowed her to keep her weapons. They would be fighting again before they ever saw daylight, even if the battle was against foes where steel could do no more than give man or woman a clean death.

Valeria found little pleasure in her present situation save being alive. Also, the Cimmerian's presence might well keep her so longer than otherwise. He had been as formidable against natural foes as against magical ones, and for rather more years than she had followed the warrior's path.

Where the tunnel divided, one way sloped upward, the other down. They halted, Valeria set her back against the wall and looked to the rear, and Conan briefly explored in both directions.

Valeria did not enjoy being even briefly alone here in the bowels of the earth. But she could master her fancies now; she would wait for real monsters to leap from the shadows before she let herself fear. She passed the brief time of waiting by unrolling the sword-thong from about her waist and linking sword and wrist securely. She hoped she would have no call for more climbing, and likewise that the damp air would keep the vine supple and strong should she need it.

Conan returned swiftly. "The way down leads to water, deeper than I'd care to try. And that's leaving out what might be in the water."

Valeria held her nose. "Something that reeks like a days-old battlefield, from what's on you."

"That, and more. I saw statues, kin to the oldest idols I saw in the Black Kingdoms. I'm more than ever certain that someone built this warren."

"But why?"

"Like as not, to save a trek through the jungle. Let's hope it's fit to do

the same for us." He looked at the upward-sloping way. "If I'm not altogether turned about, that leads back the way we came."

"Better the jungle we know than what might be down here," Valeria said fervently. "That beast in the pit sounded like something that could have eaten Xuchotl's Crawler for lunch and the dragon in the forest for dinner."

Conan said nothing, but took the lead. For three hundred paces, the tunnel sloped upward. Valeria began to hope that it might rise so close to the surface that they could make a way for themselves. If another tree had thrust a root down—

Disappointment came swiftly. Not only were the tunnel walls intact, save for one place where a niche had crumbled, but the floor began to slope downward as steeply as it had risen. It also grew as slick as if it had been oiled.

The light did not fade, and Valeria now began to make out paintings on the wall. Or at least they might have been paintings. They also might have been patterns of tiny jewels set into the stone; they seemed to sparkle. Trying to see which, Valeria looked closely at one pattern—and found that it changed before her eyes, from one beast to another, and then to yet others.

One beast was a lion, another a great fish, and she hoped that the third was a dragon. The rest were things that she decided she would not care to look at too closely, let alone meet.

Although the light did not fade, Valeria began to feel moving air brush against her skin. Her nose wrinkled at the growing reek of something long dead and thoroughly rotten. She tore another strip from Conan's shirt and bound it over her nose, and the Cimmerian did likewise.

Past a curve where a slab of wall had fallen to half block the tunnel, they came to a cavern the size of a royal hall. The light seemed to cling to the floor, so that the roof of the cavern was lost in shadow. The far wall, a good bowshot away, was likewise dimmed.

The floor of the cavern was almost lost under a carpet of fungi. They grew in great slabs, rising as high as Valeria's waist; for the most part, they were pale and flabby but with streaks of a more wholesome brown color running through them. From their stems dripped a greasy fluid that turned the soil beneath to a noisome muck, and more than a few of them had the appearance of being half-eaten.

This time the two explored together. Unspoken but plain was the

agreement that no one should go with unguarded back in this cavern.

As they circled the walls, they found more fungi that looked as if they had been gnawed at. One entire patch of soil had been eaten bare, with fresh fungi already sprouting among the rotting fragments of the old ones.

"These things grow fast," Conan observed. "Fast enough, I wager, for something to browse on them."

Halfway around the cavern, they found the fungi growing thicker than ever, and the smell of decay the strongest. Valeria stepped forward and slashed at the largest slab with her sword. It fell apart in a crumbling mass of dust and spores, revealing a massive rib—part of the remains of some unearthly creature.

"Something did browse on them, Conan," she said.

She could not help looking about the cavern. "Now they're eating it."

"If beasts can eat them—" he said.

Valeria's stomach twisted, and the last of the monkey nearly left her. "Birds and monkeys are a good test. Whatever that creature was, it might have been born of magic, left over from the days of the tunnel-builders. Who knows what it could stomach that would kill us?"

"True enough, but we've found nothing else to eat, and no water fit to drink. These look like they might have water inside."

"Ah..."

"I'll try a bit first. If my fingers and toes don't turn green and fall off—"

"Ha! A Cimmerian's no better than this beast for testing what common folk can eat. I've seen you eating what they served at the soldiers' taverns in Sukhmet!"

"Better fare than the rations, I'd say."

Valeria threw up her hands in mock disgust. "If you've a belly and bowels of iron, perhaps. I'd rather eat salt beef three years in the cask. By Erlik, I'd rather eat the cask!"

"A trifle hard on the teeth, for my taste," Conan said.

Valeria noted with amusement that he still approached the fungus as if it were a venomous snake, probing with his dagger, and only then slicing. He was also careful to catch the slice before it struck the ground. When he put it to his mouth, he bit off a portion that might have fit in a thimble with room to spare.

After a moment's chewing, he swallowed. "Greasy as a Stygian harlot's

hair," he said. "Otherwise, I've eaten worse."

"How long would it take you to remember when and where?"

"Oh, give me a year or so—" He broke off and cupped a hand to one ear. Valeria imitated him, her other hand on her sword, but heard nothing.

"Could be a trick of the echoes in this tomb," Conan said at last. Valeria wished he had not used that word.

The Cimmerian cut off another, slightly larger piece of the fungus and disposed of it as he had the first. When it went down, he licked his lips.

"Greasier than the first, but nothing else against it," he said. "Wait a bit, to see how it sits in my stomach—"

The sound was half growl, half scream, and altogether ghastly. The cavern picked it up, hurling echoes back and forth until it seemed to Valeria that they might be inside a giant drum beaten by a madman.

She would almost rather have been mad than to have seen what came lumbering into the cavern from another tunnel. It was as high as a man at the shoulders, with great plates of bone jutting from behind its eyes to guard its thick neck. Crimson orbs the size of melons glared at them past two stout horns thrusting forward from the beaked muzzle. With its tail, it was longer than a ship's boat, and from the way it sank into the ground, it was as heavy as an elephant.

Another dragon, and no Apples of Derketa to slay it. That was Valeria's first thought. A brighter one followed on its heels. *I have good company for a last battle.*

As if they had been fighting-partners for years, Valeria and Conan spread apart so that the creature could not attack both of them at once. Valeria studied the horns and headplates. If neither were too sharp, they offered handholds. Then a good thrust with sword or dagger might serve this beast as it had the crocodile.

Instead of attacking, the beast cried out again. It seemed to wait for an answer, or perhaps for the echoes to die. Then it still did not attack. It lumbered forward to the edge of the fungi, lowered its broad muzzle, and bit off a clump.

"That brute's no dragon," Conan called. "It's the fungus-eater."

"Then what killed the other—" Valeria began.

In the next moment, she had what might have been the answer to her question. Dim-sighted it might be, but the creature's hearing was keen enough. It turned toward the voices, and Conan signaled urgently for

silence.

Valeria needed no urging. She opened the distance between her and her comrade still wider. If dim enough of sight, the beast might not be able to see two foes, let alone attack them. Then one of them might die, but the other would have a chance at the kill.

If the creature saw them, it gave no sign of it. Valeria wondered if it was so scant of sight that it could spy only movement. After a moment, it lowered its head and resumed feeding.

The creature was no dainty eater. It slobbered and crunched its way through a patch of fungus as large as an Aquilonian kitchen garden. Its eating, it belches, and its footfalls raised more echoes. A cavalry trumpet in its ear might have won its attention, but scarcely any lesser sound.

Sated, it lifted its head and lumbered toward the body of the other creature—its victim, perhaps, in a battle to the death over this caveful of food. It reached the body, snuffled noisily about it, then lifted its head again and gave its challenge louder than before.

Valeria felt as if hot nails were driving into her ears, but she did not take her eyes off the creature. It might be dim of sight and unable to hear much over the sound of its own feeding, but it seemed able to scent the trace of a stranger.

Silently, Conan waved at her to come closer. Still watching their visitor, she knelt, then crawled on hands and knees through the fungi. The Cimmerian stood as still as a temple image, watching the beast make the rounds of the wall, until she reached him.

"We'll have to face him now," he whispered. "He's caught the scent of some stranger on his territory. If we don't kill him, he'll hunt us until he catches us off guard."

Valeria was ready to agree. The beast's jaws were flat, bony plates, with no more teeth than a chicken's beak. They were also large enough to swallow her whole, and strong enough to crack Conan's bones like twigs.

They separated again. They were forty paces apart when a puff of air wafted from the tunnel by which they had entered the cavern. It blew past them, and Valeria willed limbs, and even breath to stillness as she waited for the beast's reply.

It came—another screaming, thundering challenge. The echoes had not begun to die when it charged. Like a heavily laden ship in heavy seas, it labored through the fungi, trampling some, shredding others. It held its head low, horns thrusting forward like the ram of a galley. Valeria

remained still as the beast surged between them.

In the next moment, Conan shot forward like a stone from a sling. His hands gripped the upper horn, and he vaulted clear over the beast's muzzle, aiming for its neck.

Somehow, his iron grip failed him. The leap sent him sprawling across the neck instead of landing safely astride. He slid off and landed rolling, parting company with his sword in midair.

Valeria filled her lungs in a single desperate breath and let out the shriek of a soul in torment. The beast's head turned toward her. The gods might be thinking it was Conan's day to die and hers to kill, but Valeria of the Red Brotherhood let neither man nor god decide such matters for her.

Clearly, the sensing of *two* enemies was more than the beast's dim wits could endure. It cried challenge again, and began to back away.

"Together—now!" Conan roared.

That drew the beast toward him, but he was on his feet and fully armed again. Valeria had seen before that the Cimmerian could move forward and backward with equal speed; now she saw him do it again. As he gave ground, he drew the beast after him, and it seemed to forget that it had ever sensed a second opponent. Against Valeria, that was a death sentence.

She sprang forward, light-footed as a cat, leaping successfully where Conan had failed. She ended straddling the neck. She gripped the edge of the neckplates and lunged to her feet, ready to stab.

As she did, the beast reared up on its hind legs. With the swiftness and agility learned high in the rigging of half a score of ships, Valeria entrusted her sword to the wrist-thong and gripped the neckplates with both hands. Both thong and hands did their duty as Valeria dangled from the neckplates like a puppet. The beast hissed, growled, and screamed all at once, then tossed its head, trying to rid itself of the distracting nuisance.

This gave the Cimmerian his chance for a stroke at the beast's unprotected throat. His sword sang as it parted air, hand-sized scales, and the flesh beneath. Driven by all the strength of two brawny arms, the sword slashed clean through to the beast's life.

Its next cry bubbled and hissed, and sprayed a mist of blood everywhere. It did not fall, though, and Valeria heaved herself onto the neckplates. For a moment, she balanced there as if atop a mast swaying in a storm, displaying the grace of one who had done that many times.

Then her sword slashed at thin bone between the crimson eyes. The next moment, she was flying through the air as if the mast had snapped. She landed among the fungi, which broke her fall and coated her in their grease.

As she struggled to her feet, she saw Conan leading the beast away from her. It was bleeding generously now, and clearly all but blind, yet it would not fall! Valeria cursed whatever misbegotten sons of flea-bitten apes had conjured up this creature with its unnatural life.

As if her curse had been a spell, the thing seemed to find new strength. It lunged at Conan, and the Cimmerian had to break into a run to stay ahead of it. The jaws clanged and clashed, and the beast swung toward the tunnel from which Conan and Valeria had entered the cavern.

It swung toward the opening, then charged with single-minded frenzy, as if the answer to all of its woes lay in that tunnel. The charge carried it across the cavern faster than Valeria could have run, and she caught only a brief glimpse of Conan staying ahead of the jaws.

Then Cimmerian and monster together reached the mouth of the tunnel. Conan's war cry, the creature's last challenge, and the rumble of falling rock blended into one ear-torturing din. Echoes stormed about the cavern, doubling and redoubling themselves.

Valeria knelt and watched a vast cloud of dust belch from the tunnel. Nothing remained visible outside it but the tip of the beast's tail, thrashing feebly. Then the thrashing subsided to a twitching, and even the twitching ended.

Valeria commanded her hands to stop shaking and her knees to hold her up, and walked toward the fallen tunnel. She had no clear idea of what she would do when she reached it, other than seek Conan's body. If it was only caught under the beast and not under the fallen stones, she might be able to carve a way through the beast's flesh—

A massive, dark form took shape out of the dust cloud.

Valeria crammed her free hand into her mouth to stifle a scream. Her sword rose in the other, as much good as it might be against a spirit—

"Valeria!"

Valeria's mouth opened, but no sound came out. She did not drop her sword, and she was still rooted to the spot when Conan reached her.

His arms around her were so comforting that she wondered why she had not asked for them many times already. After a little while, she stopped shaking, and after a while longer, she found her voice again.

"It's as well I didn't need to go after you a second time. I've hardly a rag to spare, and that beast's hide looks too tough to cut up for garments."

Conan shrugged. "I've told you what your best garb is. If you won't believe me, that's only proof that you don't trust men."

"I give men all the trust they deserve," Valeria said with dignity. She held her thumb and forefinger about a hairbreadth apart. "At least that much." She was relieved to see that her hand was steady.

"We'd best be on our way before this uproar draws all our friend's kin," Conan said. "But there's no going back the way we came. It's solid with fallen stone where it isn't solid with dead beast."

It did nothing for Valeria's spirits to see that the only other way out of the cavern sloped sharply downward. But at least there was light as far ahead as she could make out, and a dampness in the air that hinted of water.

She turned, to see Conan slicing off a clump of fungi as large as a hunting dog. "Rations for the journey?" she asked. Her stomach wanted to heave at the thought, but she was hungry enough that it rumbled instead.

"Why not?" Conan replied, tossing the fungi to her. "If it killed quickly, I'd be dead along with that beast. If I'm still alive at our next halt, I'll say it doesn't kill at all."

Valeria tucked the mass of fungi under her arm and sheathed her sword. "Conan, you have too cursed many ways of making a woman wish to keep you alive!"

FIVE

Conan led the way down the tunnel. If danger should arise, it would most likely come from another beast, drawn by the din of the first one's death. It could also come with the Cimmerian's blessing, if it waited until he and Valeria were safely out of its path!

The tunnel sloped steadily downward, and the air grew damper. It was not as foul as one would have expected, though, as far underground as it lay, and with so much death and rotteness about.

Conan found small relief in that. Ancient magic must be all about them here, shedding light, cleansing the air, and giving life to who-knew-what monstrosities besides those they had already met. A sword and the untamed jungle before him would be his choice, but every step they took seemed to take them farther into the bowels of this warren.

Clearly, the beast and its kin had passed this way many times. Even the hardest rock of walls and floor was scored by claws and scales. Loose scales in half a score of hues had drifted like autumn leaves into crannies and windings of the tunnel. In one place, a bronze post the thickness of Conan's arm had bent almost double under the onrush of something swift, strong, and massive.

Once the tunnel branched, and Conan thought he saw a slight upward slope in the floor of the branch, at the very limits of his vision. This proved no trick of the light, but fifty paces farther on came a bend, and just beyond that, a dead end.

Nor was the dead end a natural rockfall. An enormous door of stone slabs set in what seemed to be a frame of gilded bronze blocked the way. Conan saw that it slid to and fro in bronze grooves that led into niches on either side of the tunnel.

The least of the slabs had to weigh more than the Cimmerian, and the thinnest metal rods of the frames were thicker than Valeria's legs. Some of the rods were wrought in the shape of serpents, and more serpents writhed across the slabs, some of them painted in tiny jewels, others cunningly carved.

Conan did not care to think what spells might be needed to move this door. Spells, or perhaps some device that would rival those of drowned Atlantis and make a siege-engine of Khitai seem a child's toy.

"Some of those serpents have green eyes," Valeria whispered. The awe of this place and its ancient works was in her, too. "Are they meant to be the Golden Serpents?"

Conan studied the shapes. The gilding was worn in places and tarnished in more, but, in truth, the eyes of all the serpents, carved or painted, were tiny green jewels. Studying them yet more closely, he saw that the jewels seemed to glow from within like the fire-stones they had seen in Xuchotl.

"Ha! Perhaps we've found where the Golden Serpents laired in ancient times," he said. "They would be cause enough for a door like this. It would stop a galley's ram."

"Then let us hope it does its work until we are out of these caves," Valeria said.

"Woman, where is a true pirate's heart?" Conan scoffed. He thrust a forefinger against Valeria's ribs.

She lightly batted his hand away. "Down in her boots, I confess, although I'll geld you if you breathe a word of it." She rubbed her stomach.

"Her stomach's about to follow." She looked at the fungi under her arm. "Are these really fit to eat?"

"They haven't killed me yet."

"Just let me eat my fill, and no doubt you will writhe and die the moment afterward."

The bronze door would have guarded their backs nicely, but who could say what lay on the other side? Also, if one of the beasts should catch their scent and come down the branch tunnel, they would be trapped.

So they returned to the junction of the tunnels to eat. "Tastes like raw sea slugs," Valeria said after a few mouthfuls.

"And how are they? I've heard of them, but also that they're poison if not cooked."

"It's not the cooking that takes out the poison. There's a spot in the head that needs cutting out, or one slug can kill a ship's crew. A cunning hand with a knife can do the work, though, and then the slug's called a rare treat in some lands. Mostly farther south than we've sailed, but during one hot summer, the slugs spawned farther north than usual."

They finished as much fungus as seemed wise, in a silence that was almost companionable. Conan vowed that if he and Valeria lived to reach a land with civilized eating-houses, he would buy her a meal she would not soon forget.

Meanwhile, they had traveled long enough and far enough to be weary. They tossed a piece of fungus for who kept first watch, and Conan won the honor.

"Need we keep watches at all?" Valeria asked. She pressed a hand lightly against the Cimmerian's battered ribs. He drew a deep breath, but not from any pain her touch gave him.

"I've no wish to end up in the belly of one of those beasts, or to be trampled by one, either. And they may not be all that roam down here."

"Now you have made it certain that I will not sleep for the waking nightmares you just gave me!" Her pouting, though, was largely pretense.

Conan gripped Valeria's hand and gently thrust it away. "Lose no sleep over me, at least. I've had worse hurts as a boy, falling off a roof my father and I were thatching."

"As you wish, Conan," Valeria said. She turned and settled down from where she could watch in all directions. Conan allowed himself a moment to admire the fine, straight back that plunged down from the long neck to

the well-rounded hips. Then he placed his steel ready to hand, kicked off his boots, and lay down to seek as much slumber as a man might win from a cold stone floor with magic all about him.

The hut where Dobanpu Spirit-Speaker slept when he visited the largest Ichiribu village was a place of shadows and subtle odors. It almost seemed to Seyganko that a tame spirit lurked in the grass of the roof, driving out the light.

The odors mingled grass, cooking smoke, the smoke of fires made with herbs, and the oil that Emwaya rubbed into her skin. Seyganko remembered the first time she had allowed him the honor of rubbing it in. His body tautened with remembered and anticipated desire.

In her corner of the hut, Emwaya sat like a carved image. She wore the plainest of waistcloths and only a single bone ornament in her hair, and her face was somber as she shifted her gaze from her father to her betrothed.

"You asked what we must do, Father?" she asked.

"In plain words," Dobanpu replied. His voice was the strongest part of him remaining, although he had not wholly lost the stout thews and broad shoulders of his youth. He had seen nearly sixty turns of the seasons and outlived all the children of his first wives, and all but Emwaya from his second family.

Some said he had suffered these losses as the price of all the time he had spent in the spirit world. Even those who said this whispered it. When they spoke aloud, they praised the courage with which he had borne his losses. They did doubt aloud the wisdom of his teaching his daughter the art of Spirit-Speaking, but only when Emwaya was not in hearing. Some called her tongue the deadliest weapon among the Ichiribu.

Dobanpu rose, stretching limbs cramped by long sitting. "Very surely, I want to know your thoughts as to what we must do," he said. "I did not go against all custom in teaching you my arts to have you sit as mute as the frog-queen in the tale of Myosta!"

"You asked, I answer," Emwaya said. "We must watch Aondo. Or better yet, find a way to take his weapons."

"Aondo is needed among the warriors," Seyganko said.

"Even at your back?"

"Properly watched, even at my back," the warrior asserted. "We can do

nothing against him without dishonor and insult."

"If he feels insult, he can challenge you. That will be the end of him."

Dobanpu laughed softly. "Daughter, you have more faith in your betrothed's prowess than is wise. Aondo is so strong that it might not matter if he is as slow as *a* mired hippopotamus. Remember that when the great-jawed one reaches its victim, it is certain death."

"Indeed," Seyganko said. "Also, any man's foot may slip if his luck is out and the spirits not with him. They might well desert me if I dishonored a proven warrior like Aondo by trapping him into a death-duel."

"*You* speak of what the spirits might do?" Emwaya snapped.

"Yes, and if it is not to your liking, you may ask your father to end his teaching of me!"

Warrior and woman glared at each other for a moment, while Dobanpu raised his eyes to the shadowed ceiling and seemed to be asking the spirits for a brief moment of deafness, that he might not hear two whom he loved making fools of themselves. At last it was Emwaya who lowered her eyes.

That, Seyganko knew, was as much of an apology as he was likely to receive. But Emwaya was now of a mind to listen, and he could speak more freely.

"Also, I do not think that Aondo is the first of our enemies among the warriors. The loudest, I grant you. But first? No, I think more danger comes from one whose name I do not know, but whose presence I can guess."

"A spy for Chabano?" Emwaya asked.

"For him, for the God-Men, or perhaps for both."

"A bold one, if he thinks to serve both," Dobanpu said almost meditatively. "One hears tales, and more than a few of them, that the friendship of Paramount Chief and God-Men is a frail thing."

"All the more reason, then, to keep the spy alive," Seyganko said. "A man who tells tales can be made to bear false ones, to set his masters at each other's throats."

"You play stickball with lives," Emwaya said, her voice brittle.

"How not, daughter?" Dobanpu asked. "Learn a little more of my art and you will understand why this must sometimes be so. Or else give over learning Spirit-Speaking, wed Seyganko, bear his sons, govern his house and lesser wives—"

"And die when the Kwanyi and the God-Men strike, plowing our ashes into the fields before they sail south to carry all before them!" Emwaya shouted. Seyganko thought her about to weep.

Her storms were violent but swift, like those of the Lake of Death. She blinked hard, then contrived a smile. "Father, Seyganko. I know the price of any choice other than the one I have made. It may be the price even if I walk the way you bade me. But I do not have to rejoice in what the gods have sent to the Ichiribu."

"No one but a fool would ask you to," Seyganko said gently. He wished to take her in his arms, but thought the moment unfit. "Do you see any fools here about you?"

Emwaya laughed aloud. "Not yet."

"Then we go on as we have begun," Dobanpu said. "Indeed, I think this spy gives us yet more cause to leave Aondo alive. He can hardly be the spy, but I would wager a hutful of mealies and a new canoe that he knows who that man is. Following the leopard's cub has been known to lead a hunter to the leopard's lair."

Valeria had lost all notion of how long they had been tramping these endless underground passages. It was not merely an underground city they had entered, it was near to an underground kingdom. Already they had traversed thrice the distance from one side of Xuchotl to the other.

At least they had done so had they traveled in anything like a straight line. Valeria had barely more notion of their direction than she had of the passage of time. For all she could say, they might be wandering in circles.

No, that could not be altogether true. Except where they found blind tunnels or stairs leading up to impassable barriers, they had yet to retrace their steps. They were moving onward, but toward what destination, only the gods knew.

This place of cunningly wrought rock, and both beasts and spells of incredible antiquity, seemed as remote from the sight of the gods as it was from the sight of the sun. If any answers were to be found, she and Conan would have to find them unaided.

As always when Valeria found her thoughts thrashing about thus, like a cat in a sack, she eased herself by taking the lead. The need to be keenly alert to hidden dangers cudgeled her wits into some sort of order. The Cimmerian doubtless knew her reasons, but courtesy to a battle-comrade had so far curbed his tongue.

Another cave opened before them. Or chamber, rather. It might have been a cave once, carved from the rock over the eons by oozing, then dripping, then gushing water. Now the underground stream that had done the work flowed through a channel carved in a floor of pale, rose-hued stone, polished until it was silken-smooth to the touch and lightly shining even in the pale magic-light.

Walls and ceiling were of the natural rock, but squared off, every corner a right angle as neat as any mason could have made. But then, masons had made them, even if they had doubtless worked with magic instead of mallets and chisels.

Conan knelt beside the channel and reached down to dip a finger in the water. "Fresh, as cold as a Hyperborean's arse, and flowing swiftly. Anyone for a bath before we drink our fill?"

Valeria had doffed her garments ere the Cimmerian had finished speaking. She no longer feared Conan's eyes upon her, but found them, rather, a trifle flattering. Since they had left Xuchotl, she had grown somewhat thin-flanked, yet Conan seemed not to notice. Or perhaps pretending not to notice such matters was another courtesy between battle-comrades?

They both splashed merrily about in the channel, deep enough to sit in up to their necks had it not been too cold for sitting at all. Then they drank, until Valeria could feel her empty stomach filled at least with water.

Valeria knelt by the channel, clad only in goose-flesh and drops of water, to rinse out her garments as best she could. When she had wrung them dry enough to wear, she stretched and began retying her boot bindings.

"How long *have* we been down here?" she asked as she finished the left foot.

"If our sleeping's any guide, for three days, four at the outside."

"By Set's fangs, it feels longer!"

"That it might, but don't let yourself be careless of judging the time. That way lies madness."

"Tell me what I do not know, Conan! Have you ever been out of the sun so long?"

"Yes."

His tone did not encourage her to ask further. She let it pass. She knew by now that some of his adventures he would boast of in taverns, and

others he would carry as secrets to his grave. She only prayed that neither his grave nor hers might be in this godless wilderness beneath the earth.

He stood up and for a moment held her at arm's length, his massive hands almost covering her shoulders. "We can take heart from this much: We've not gone in circles, and we've come far enough to be well beyond the river. Also, there are more worked and finished passages every day."

"We're closer to the heart of this city?"

"If city it be, I'd wager we are. And where the heart of any city lies, there will be the treasures and pleasures. Perhaps, in this city, even ways to the surface!"

His hands lifted from her shoulders, and Valeria knew a moment's urge to grab them and pull them back to where they had been, or even to other places. She laughed at this picture of herself and Conan tumbling on the hard stone until they rolled into the channel again and cooled their ardor!

"If you can find that much to laugh about in our case, woman, I'll take you anywhere!"

Valeria almost replied, "And I will follow." But those would be ill-omened words, a promise she could hardly expect to keep. She was of the Red Brotherhood, and she had acknowledged no master for too long to change now.

"Let us see where we have to go to leave this place first, Conan," she said. Then she sat and began binding her other foot.

"On them!"

Chabano, Paramount Chief of the Kwanyi, stood at the edge of the platform in the tree and shouted to the hundred warriors below. The underchiefs raised their hands in salute, while the warriors clashed their spears against their shields.

Then the Kwanyi warriors leaped forward at the enemy. The "enemy" was only a field of stumps, but the charge was not without peril. Chabano had seen to that.

The first warrior fell even before the charge reached the stumps. The grass covering a pit gave under his pounding feet. He did not fall all the way in to impale himself on the dung-poisoned stake at the bottom, however. He flung himself forward desperately, reached the far edge of the pit, and rolled clear. A moment later, he was on his feet and running to rejoin his comrades. They were now well ahead of him, but Chabano found

no fatal fault in that.

The warrior's eyes had not been as keen as they might have been, but his limbs and wits had come to his rescue. He had not even dropped his spear or shield, a dereliction that would have earned him a beating.

Two more warriors fell at the tangle of vines stretched among the stumps. One of them did not rise swiftly enough. Chabano watched the warrior's underchief run up behind him and slash him fiercely across the shoulder with the snakeskin *mboqa*. The warrior leaped up, made the briefest gesture of supplication, and ran on.

The other fallen warrior did not rise at all, but there was reason for his lying among the vines. Trying desperately to keep his feet, he had rammed his head into one of the stumps. Doubtless he was senseless; he might even be dying, and small loss if he were. Had he thought less of the shame of the *mboqa* and more of how his tribe needed all of its warriors, he might have done otherwise and still be running.

The remaining warriors reached the far side of the field of stumps in a double line more ragged than Chabano cared to see. The underchiefs, he decided, would face one of the lesser ordeals tonight.

Now the warriors went furiously through the rite of shield and spear, throwing the small spear, hooking an opponent with the shield, then lunging with the great spear as the shield-hooking exposed the other and drew him close. They knew it meant more than pleasing the gods, or even Chabano, who was closer than the gods and therefore perhaps more to be feared. It meant victory, on the day when the Lake of Death was no longer closed to the Kwanyi by the Ichiribu. Victory, over every tribe in their path for as far as they chose to march.

All the Kwanyi would then have their pick of slaves and food, huts worthy of a chief, and honor among gods and men alike. They would also have honor in the eyes of Chabano, who had made them what they were and would lead them when they became still greater.

Chabano sprang down from his platform. Although he had seen just short of forty turns of the seasons, his eyes and his wind were those of a man far younger. His feet, painted the red that marked his chieftaincy, danced in the dust as he approached his warriors.

"Hail, Chabano!" the underchiefs called. The warriors repeated the greeting, then clashed shield and spear again.

"Well done," Chabano said. "Not perfect, but only the gods are perfect."

"Thus say the God-Men," a warrior shouted. One had to be of the

Kwanyi oneself to catch the note of mockery in the man's voice. The God-Men were not Kwanyi, and to them, these words would seem full of honor.

Empty honor, as empty as their heads.

Only if a Kwanyi warrior had grown so foul of spirit as to spy for the God-Men would they learn they had been mocked. Chabano refused to believe that any of the men he had sworn, taught, and led in ordeal, battle, or rite could be so corrupt.

Even if one had turned, Chabano still had the advantage. *He* had found eyes and ears among the God-Men before the God-Men could have found any among his warriors.

The height of the sun above the trees reminded him that this day's war rites were almost done but his work was not. He slung his shield across his back with the ritual three twists of the thong and held his spear across his chest with both hands in the customary manner.

"Warriors of the Kwanyi, I must go speak with the gods. This day you have pleased me. This night you may please yourselves."

That meant an ordeal for the slave women, perhaps for a few unlucky free women as well. It would also be an ordeal for the brew-sisters, who would have to work very hard to keep the warriors from growing thirsty. Thirsty warriors had been known to ignore the fact that a woman wore a headdress of the free Kwanyi.

"Let us go with you as far as the gods allow," said an underchief.

It was a moment to give fear, but not to shed blood.

Chabano slowly lowered his spear until its butt sank into the earth. Without seeming to exert himself, he drove the butt half an arm's length into the jungle floor.

Then he whipped his shield off his back, hooked his spear loose, and caught it as it flew high. He ended with the spear aimed at the chest of the underchief who had spoken.

The man knew that any outward sign of the fear thundering within him would send the spear leaping into his chest. He did not even make the gesture of supplication, although his eyes did not leave Chabano.

"The gods command that we stay here?" the man said. It showed high courage to make it *a* question.

"They do," Chabano said. "Do you doubt their word?"

"The gods speak, but do they always speak plainly?" the man persisted.

Chabano decided that such courage deserved the reward of an end to these fear-jests.

"You have wisdom, more than some I could name, who think that the gods' messages bear only one meaning."

That was mockery of the God-Men which might be dangerous even for Chabano should it reach their ears. The chief did not overly much care.

"But when the gods wish me dead, they will have me if all the warriors of the Kwanyi march with me. If the gods wish me safe, I may go to this day's speaking alone. Go, and find better company than *I* shall enjoy for a while!"

The warriors grinned at one another, hearing the boldness of a chief who dared mock even the gods themselves, not merely the God-Men. Then they tossed their spears, gave a war cry, and strode off into the jungle.

Chabano waited until the last was gone before he turned onto the path he intended to follow. Even after that, he waited for a space, hiding, and listening to be sure that he alone was taking this path. He did not speak to the gods, but his eye and ear among the God-Men could tell him more than the gods ever had.

Conan thought he heard a sound to their rear. He dropped back, looked for a place from which to watch unseen, and found none that would hide a mouse, let alone a Cimmerian. He contrived to flatten himself against the wall and keep the silence of a cat stalking that mouse.

Then he heard Valeria signaling with the beat of dagger-hilt against stone wall. Conan listened. He heard the code that said, "Come as soon as you can, but there is no danger here." To any ear but his and Valeria's, it would seem a natural sound of these haunted depths, or at least nothing that spoke of human presence.

Conan waited, for about as long as a skilled tavern dancer might take to shed her garments when the watchers bid eagerly in silver coin for each piece of silk. Then he decided that once again this city of the dead could play tricks with even the ears of a seasoned warrior.

He still walked cat-footed as he came up behind Valeria. She did not start or make a sound, though; her ears seemed keener now than when she had first gone underground. Instead, she pointed down the tunnel. Her gesture was more eloquent than words, which were not needed. Conan saw that a hundred paces farther on, the light turned green.

Now both were as silent as hunting creatures, or prey seeking to escape,

as they crept forward, one against either wall. Both bore steel in their hands, both set feet down as if they trod on shards of glass, or on sleeping serpents.

They reached the turning where the light changed, and looked beyond it. For a moment, Conan thought they *had* stumbled upon a sleeping serpent—a monster such as he had fought too often to care to meet again.

Then he saw that it was but a trick of the light that made the serpent seem whole. Only a skeleton remained, although that skeleton stretched twenty paces from the tooth-studded skull to the delicate bones of the tail.

It was the light that had deceived Conan, a light that flooded the cave. A light that seemed to rise like smoke from green jewels piled deep inside the circle formed by the skeleton. The light of a greater mass of fire-stones than Conan had ever dreamed existed.

In the Black Kingdoms, Conan had heard the legend of the Dying Place of the Elephants. There, it was said, the great gray beasts went to end their days. There, ivory to buy a kingdom lay, waiting for some bold adventurer to stumble upon it.

He had never heard of such a tale about the Golden Serpents. Indeed, he had never heard of anyone who had seen more of a Golden Serpent than its fire-stone eyes—and it was only a tale that Golden Serpents' eyes and fire-stones were one and the same.

Rather, it had been a tale. Now Conan knew it for the truth. In the skull, as large as a horse's, two vast, green orbs flashed. Their glow was identical to that of the jewels on the floor.

Conan softly let out his breath and stalked forward. Nothing living could have been more silent. In that silence, he reached the skeleton and knelt beside it, studying the eyes.

Now he understood why even such vast creatures as the Golden Serpents yielded so many fire-stones. Each eye was the size of a platter, and each one was made of twoscore or more stones. Some were as small as acorns, others as large as the finest Bossonian cider apples. All glowed with that unnatural light.

Conan also understood why the light had nothing of nature in it. No natural creature had such eyes; the Golden Serpents were magicians' work. The same magicians who had wrought this maze in the rock, where he and Valeria might yet end their days? Perhaps. If so, they were long dead, and their creations likewise.

Then even that small comfort left Conan. A wind colder than any that

ever blew in Cimmeria seemed to play upon his spine. Shreds of flesh still clung to the serpent's bones. Golden scales still covered a few of those shreds, and a faint miasma of decay rose from the greater part of them.

Had it been here since the time of its creators, this Golden Serpent's bones would have been fleshless, or the shreds of flesh mummified by the subterranean air. This creature had been living while Conan walked the earth above, perhaps even while he had fought and caroused with the Barachan pirates.

Conan motioned Valeria forward, then moved to where he could look both ways. He waited, steel at the ready, for her to study the bones and see what he had seen.

Chabano's eyes and ears were those of a warrior half his age. He did not need these to warn him of his spy's coming, for Ryku seemed as careless as a child of being seen or heard. He was first among the lesser God-Men, the Silent Brothers, but his lack of jungle craft made him anything but silent.

Chabano used the time he gained to place himself high on a branch above the trail. When the young God-Man came stamping into view like a warthog in rut, Chabano slung both spear and shield, then gripped a stout vine and leaped from his perch.

The other threw up his hands in dismay as Chabano seemed to fly down on him out of the sky. Then he flung himself back against the mossy bark of a forest tree and began silently mouthing curses.

"Cease," Chabano said. He put the tip of his spear under the man's chin and gently raised the weapon until the man closed his mouth. "Or do you think the gods will hear you without your masters also hearing?" the chief added. "Surely you came as if you feared no human foe."

"I do not," Ryku said. "I am in the land of friends."

Chabano laughed longer than was good for Ryku's pride, but he did not take the spear away. By the time the chief was done laughing, a drop of blood showed on Ryku's chin.

"Is friendship then a jest?" Ryku asked. He stood without trying to wipe away the blood, and met Chabano's eyes.

Again the chief decided there was enough courage here to deserve some reward. "It is not. Nor is it found among all the Kwanyi. At least not toward you, if it were known why you are here."

"Who would tell?"

"You would, if someone heated a spear and applied it to sufficient parts of your body to unman or blind you," Chabano said. "Do not deny it."

"I do not," Ryku said sturdily, but seeming a trifle bemused.

"As well. Do not, then, tread like an elephant when you come to our meetings. Even if you have no enemies, I do, and they might follow you to me."

"As you wish." Then Ryku took a more defiant tone. "One would think you feared that the over-throwers of Xuchotl were abroad in the land instead of your own warriors!"

"They could well be. Or do your masters know otherwise?"

"I came to tell you that they do not know one way or the other. They cannot even be sure what magic was wrought to bring down the Accursed City."

To Chabano, it seemed likely as not that it was the city folk's own magic that had finally sent them mad, and not outsider's spells. If they had then fallen on one another and cleansed the city of their foul and useless lives, so much the better.

The folk of Xuchotl had bred for too long, and to little purpose. Now they had left what would be a fine city from which to rule these lands when the Kwanyi under him had done with all their enemies.

That was a dream he would not dwell on, however. Not while this close to Ryku, who had the rank of Silent Brother but more of the God-Men's knowledge than a wise man would offend without good cause.

"Then what do the God-Men wish of the Kwanyi?"

"Who says they wish anything?"

"I, Paramount Chief of the Kwanyi, say so. When have you come to me without telling me some wishes of your masters? They know not what you bear to me, but you do it nonetheless."

"The First Speaker wishes as before to learn anything you discover of how Xuchotl was overthrown," Ryku said. "He also wishes the return of the slave girl taken by the Ichiribu on the night of their raid."

This last demand was new. "Nothing more?"

"It is enough for the First Speaker."

Chabano laughed coarsely. "I should say that a wench of that age is more than adequate for such an old man. What does he want of her?"

Ryku had enough courage, or enough fear of his leader to glare at

Chabano, a thing few did and lived. "Know you not what it is to be a man with a woman? It will make a fine tale, that the great chief of the Kwanyi—"

"—dashed out the brains of a God-Man whose tongue flew too far too long," Chabano finished. He returned the glare, and Ryku fell silent.

"I shall discover what may be done prudently to return the girl, and then find men to do it. This is not to be doubted."

"I do not doubt it," Ryku said. He was wise enough to make no promises for the masters who did not know of his divided loyalties. "What of Xuchotl's fate?"

"What of it?" Chabano retorted. "To ask me to seek wielders of mighty magic is to ask the snake to hunt the leopard. Only by great good fortune will I win any knowledge worth having."

Ryku's gestures and face told Chabano that matters were unchanged. The God-Men would not put into Kwanyi hands any of their power, not even to seek the cause of Xuchotl's doom. They would rather remain in ignorance than risk giving others too much knowledge.

There lay the difference between the First Speaker of the Living Wind and the Paramount Chief of the Kwanyi. For knowledge, Chabano had given much, and might yet give more. There was another difference, too. The chief knew that the God-Men would use the magic of Xuchotl's foes against even the Kwanyi. He would not, if he could help it, give them the power to doom his people.

Ryku went through the rituals of farewell from hunter to chief, then withdrew. He could be heard for a shamefully long distance, but at least he seemed to be attempting silence.

Valeria knelt beside the skeleton and the glowing mass of fire-stones until she saw what Conan had wished her to see. Then she rose. It seemed that every movement of her joints, every breath she took, had to be loud enough to raise echoes and warn whatever lurked farther within this nightmare of stone.

She wanted to whisper, but when she tried to speak thus, no sound came out. Then she took a deep breath, bid fear kiss her hindquarters, and laughed aloud.

"So the Golden Serpents are no legend after all? This brute lost its scales a while back, I judge, but the eyes tell the tale."

Conan nodded. "And I'm thinking that it hasn't been dead for as long as the beast we found dead in the fungus cave."

"I wish it had been," Valeria said. "Even a slab of that fungus would seem like a banquet." She looked at the Cimmerian. "What are you staring at? The new shape of my stomach, after being so near empty these past days?"

The Cimmerian grinned. "You take it lightly, our sharing these tunnels with the Golden Serpents."

Valeria blinked—and realized that her eyes were not quite dry. She turned away, and Conan did her the courtesy of letting her stand thus until she had command of herself again.

"How should I take it?" she said at last. "We are, I think, at that time of an ordeal when one can either run mad or laugh. I'll laugh, if it's all the same to you."

Conan's roar raised echoes and made stones fall from the pile. He kissed her roundly on both cheeks, then on the lips, and finished with a smart slap to her rear.

"I'll have to buy that pox-ridden captain a drink the next time I see him. How else would I have won such a comrade if he hadn't driven you into flight?"

"The gods only know. I'd rather voyage with a bog-troll, as often as not." She knelt and set her boots on the floor.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Conan, this may be our last hoard of fire-stones. Have you forgotten that I am of the Red Brotherhood, that you have a name among the Barachans, and that good pirates do not leave fine loot to gather dust?"

Conan laughed shortly and joined her at her work. The fire-stones were light for their size, and enough to fill the toes of their boots was no great burden.

Magic might be in the stones, of course, magic as evil as any in Xuchotl. They might even draw other Golden Serpents, living ones, to avenge the theft of their dead mates' treasures.

Valeria did not care. The magic here would slay her and the Cimmerian or not, as fate would have it. It would no longer put her in fear.

As for the Golden Serpents, let them come. A day or two more and she would be ready not only to spit one on her sword, but to eat it raw afterward!

SIX

"Conan," Valeria whispered, "I smell cooking fat. Or else my wits have finally parted their mooring lines."

Conan sniffed the air, more damp and mephitic of late than before. They had come, he judged, half a league through scum-coated water that seemed to both ooze from below and drip from above. He wondered if they were under a river, or more likely, a lake.

At times, the water was no more than a thin coating of slime on the stone, which made footing treacherous even for two nimble warriors like the Cimmerian and his companion. At other times, it rose to their ankles, or even to their knees. After the first such place, Valeria slung her jewel-laden boots about her neck. The Cimmerian's greater stature allowed him to keep his treasure riding at his waist. Neither needed the boots to guard leather-tough feet, and indeed, preferred bare toes by which to feel out lurking menaces.

When knee-deep, the water seemed sometimes almost solid with plant and animal matter that the ancient magic of these tunnels had been unable to keep alive. In those places, it exhaled a noisome stench that made even the hardened Cimmerian wish for something to bind over his mouth and nose.

He wished even more to know what sort of creature had risen to attack Valeria on the day they had entered this maze. Was it a water-dweller, and were they perhaps approaching the lair of more of the breed? Well-wielded steel was an answer to most creatures, but if the water grew much deeper, swordplay would be sadly slowed... to say nothing of what this muck could hardly fail to do to their blades—

Conan finished his sniffing. "Your wits are as sound as ever. I smell it, too. Fish oil, I'd wager."

"What do you have to wager with, Cimmerian?"

"Not as much as you, I'll be bound, but—"

It was Valeria who held up one hand and pointed with the dagger in the other. "Stairs?"

Conan's eyes followed the gesture. "If they're not, my eyes are failing me."

Valeria grimaced. "It does seem darker along here." Even her courage

was not proof against the thought of the light abandoning them. Magical as it was, they owed their lives to it.

"All the more reason to start climbing the stairs, then."

Between them and the entry to the stairs, the water deepened almost to Valeria's waist. They pushed forward through the filth, greasy whorls of floating muck drifting to either side as they advanced. Conan had both sword and dagger drawn now, and held the weapons clear of the water, ready to strike down at the slightest hint of alien presence.

Nothing except muck and foul odors impeded their passage, although they were black and dripping from thighs to feet when they reached dry stone. Conan climbed the first few steps, reached a spot where the wall had cracked and now sagged across his path, and went to his hands and knees.

He could barely creep under the stone. Ten paces farther along, he could barely move at all—but the sight ahead made his heart leap with hope.

The stairs wound up into natural darkness that reeked of fish oil, animal fat, and burned grain. In places, the steps had crumbled and would offer precarious footing, even without the darkness. In one place, the stairs seemed to rise up a vertical chimney that would need to be climbed with back against one wall and feet against the other.

Far above, like a single star shining on a rainy night, a dim yellow light glowed. Firelight, to Conan's eyes, with no magic about it. Rather, it told of human presence.

The only problem was that he was just a finger's breadth too large to pass through the gap and begin the ascent. Even his strength might not be equal to shifting the fallen slab, and could well bring the mass down on top of them if he succeeded.

Thank Mitra, there was another way, or at least another hope. Groping into the open, Conan's hand touched a puddle of congealed grease. Clearly, it had dripped down from above, where what must be a cook fire burned cheerfully.

Conan started retracing his steps. For a moment, he feared he would become wedged; then he felt Valeria tugging at his ankles. Her lithe strength made the difference. Conan slid free, coughed dust from his throat, and stood up.

"You'll have to go first. Slip through the gap, then pass all the grease you'll find—"

"Grease?"

"Somebody's done years of cooking up above. The grease must have been dripping—"

"Grease?"

"If I want an echo, woman, I'll shout! Go up and see for yourself if you doubt me."

Valeria shook her head hastily, then grinned. "In truth, why should I be surprised? This is the maddest quest I've ever been on. It would disappoint me if it did not stay so to the end."

Conan kept to himself the thought that the quest might be far from over. They could not be out of the jungle yet, or even into the borderlands of the Black Kingdoms, where the name of Amra carried some weight. The people above might be friendly and welcoming; they might also greet him and Valeria with spears, or even with that cook fire that now seemed so merry. There were not as many cannibals in this land as legend had it, but there were enough.

"Well, then. Let's not stand about scratching each other's fleas like a pair of apes. Up!"

Valeria scrambled up the stairs and vanished ahead. Conan followed, to see Valeria's boots and sole garment lying on the stone. She herself was nowhere to be seen, but from the far side of the gap came the sound of someone desperately trying not to spew.

"You mean to smear yourself with *this* to pass through the gap?"

"Do you see any perfumed oil about?"

"Ask a foolish question..." Valeria muttered. Then Conan saw her, nude and pale in the darkness, kneeling to smear grease on the stone at the narrowest passage. Only when she had finished that work did she begin tossing handfuls of the grease through the passage to the Cimmerian.

The stuff reeked like a kitchen-midden, and its touch made Conan's flesh crawl. Still, he went to work vigorously, smearing the grease on his skin as fast as Valeria passed it through to him.

"What happens if you still can't make your way past?" Valeria asked.

"Then you climb up yourself and ask the folk above to come down and chip away a passage for me. I'm no more than a finger's breadth too large. It will be no great matter."

He thought he heard Valeria mutter again. "If they don't think I'm a witch or a madwoman, no doubt it will." Then the Cimmerian tossed his weapons and garments through the gap, lay down, and began his passage.

The grease helped. He was almost through this time before he became wedged firmly in place. He stretched out both arms for Valeria to grip, and she added her strength and weight to his. He did not budge.

Conan groped with his feet, seeking a stout rest that would let him use the full power of his massive legs. One foot flailed in the air; the other found the wall. Conan willed all the strength of his body into the muscles of that leg, felt himself moving even as the rock flayed skin from his back and shoulders, then felt the rock itself move.

If he had summoned all his strength before, he now summoned that and half again as much. He heaved upward and forward, ignoring the wrenching of muscles and the creaking of bones. More skin vanished, and his lungs seemed filled with red-hot sand as he fought for the breath not merely to live by, but that he might fight and prevail.

The Cimmerian's strength was equal to the task. The stone did not slip and crush him. Instead, it held firm for a moment—then, incredibly, it opened wider.

Conan thought he heard Valeria utter what might have been either a prayer or an oath. He knew he felt her long fingers gripping his wrists again, and as the grip tightened, she flung herself backward.

For one more moment, the rock held Conan, and he was not sure which would happen first—his pulling free, or his arms wrenching out of their sockets. Then the tiny widening of the opening, the grease on skin and rock, his own strength, and Valeria's desperate efforts all joined to send him flying out of the gap. He landed almost on top of Valeria, and it was a while before either of them caught their breath enough to notice it. Even then, the woman did not protest. She only smiled and threw an arm around Conan's neck.

He returned the smile and rolled off, then fought breath back into his lungs and stood up. He felt as if he had been wrestling one of the Golden Serpents. His skin was scraped from flesh in half a score of places, and muscles and joints were cursing him roundly. The filth from the tunnel itched and stung wherever it fell on raw places, and altogether he had hardly felt worse during some of the times he had escaped from slavery.

But he had ignored pain even then because he was free, and now he did the same for much the same reason. That magic-haunted maze and its monsters had done their best to make an end of him, or at least to make the maze his and Valeria's tomb. Now they were free of it, even if to do no more than to die on their feet, their blades in hand.

Conan judged that all of his limbs were still attached and could perform

their duties. Then he resumed his garments, except for his boots, which he hung about his neck as Valeria carried hers.

Valeria meanwhile had propped her head on one elbow and was contemplating him with what appeared to be amusement. Conan returned her contemplation, although with more than amusement as she had not yet donned even her one scanty garment.

"If you've done looking at me like a buyer at a donkey—" Conan said at last.

"I'd have you bathed before I bought you," Valeria replied. She held her nose. "Or maybe boiled."

"*You* could put a he-goat to flight yourself," Conan said. He reached down. "Up, woman. We're not done yet."

While standing in the open on the far side of the gap, he had seen at least two more tunnels leading off from the chamber. The magic light seemed to glow dimly far down one of them; the other was dark and no higher than Conan's waist. The stone at its mouth also seemed curiously worked, not so much carved as *eaten*, as if by the acids that the sword-makers of Khitai were said to use upon fine blades to etch cunning patterns upon them.

He thought of acids that could eat stone, and he remembered what had nearly taken Valeria, leaving its mark on her ankle. The mark was still there, beneath the filth. The thing that had made it might have also made the tunnel. No, he and Valeria were not done with this ancient maze until they stood in the sunlight again.

The first sign that Seyganko had of anything amiss was Emwaya's stumbling. That would not have told another man much, for Emwaya was dancing in a circle in the center of Seyganko's hut. It was, moreover, a dance so swift and complex that her feet seemed to spurn the earth; even the warrior's keen eye could hardly follow their movements.

She leaped—and instead of landing on her toes, she went to hands and knees. Seyganko sprang forward to help her rise. She shook off his hand and remained kneeling, then stretched her full length on the reed-strewn floor of the hut.

Again Seyganko offered aid; again Emwaya spurned it. Then she turned her head so that one ear was against the floor, and stretched out both arms. Her fingers writhed in gestures the warrior knew came from the Spirit-Speaking rituals.

Emwaya was not sick or hurt, it seemed. But if she had sensed some threat to the Ichiribu from deep within the spirit world, this was small consolation. Seyganko gripped his club and measured the distance to his spears, although reason told him that mere wood and iron could do nothing against such menaces as Emwaya might have heard.

At last she stood, brushing dried reeds from her breasts. Now she allowed Seyganko to support her, lead her to a sleeping mat, pour beer from a jug and offer it. But she sat with the wooden cup in her hand, licking her lips, eyes staring beyond Seyganko into places where he knew he could not follow.

"From below," she said. "It comes from below."

"What is *it*?"

"Have you never heard of the Stone City?"

"That legend?"

"I begin to think it is no legend. It could lie beneath this very village, with spirits from before men were men guarding it."

"It could. But then, it might not—" The wish to banter left Seyganko as he saw Emwaya's face harden.

"*Something* has made the spirits uneasy. I cannot say which spirits, or where, but I feel danger to the Ichiribu."

"I shall call out the *fanda*," Seyganko said. The *fanda* consisted of six warriors of each clan, who took turns being armed, girded, and painted for war. Seyganko was not painted, but his war luck was so proverbial that no one thought he needed the adornment except in great battles.

"Send a messenger," Emwaya said. "You must stay here while I paint you."

"There is need for haste more than for paint."

"Not when the enemy is unknown spirits."

"If the spirits are coming, then you and your father are needed, not the *fanda*."

"We will be needed before long, but the *fanda* has work, too. They must guide folk away from danger, keep them from panic, watch for thieves who might find untended huts a temptation—"

"Perhaps I should do your work and you mine, since you know it so well."

Emwaya looked hurt, as she seldom did when reminded of the

sharpness of her tongue. Then she actually clung to him. "We each have our duties, I fear. Now, have you your war paint about here?"

"Yes. You are going to paint all of me?"

Emwaya lowered her eyes. "All. Do not hope that we will have time, though."

Seyganko grinned and began undoing his loincloth. The full ritual battle-paint included a warrior's loins and manhood. In times past, Emwaya's painting him had ended with much pleasure to both.

Yet something told him that this would not be one of those times. Emwaya spoke of spirits she had not encountered; Seyganko had little doubt that she spoke the truth.

"Hold on, Conan. My grip is slipping."

Valeria felt the Cimmerian's massive shoulders tighten under her feet. Free to move one hand without falling, she groped for a better purchase on the stone. It was slick with her own blood, issuing from where her first grip had gashed the hand.

At last she thought she had found what she sought. Many years of swordplay and climbing rigging had given her long arms more strength than commonly found in a woman. She did not fear falling as long as she had a good grip.

She had judged correctly, but she was dripping sweat by the time she rolled onto the ledge above. For the tenth time since they had begun their climb, she had to brush her hair out of her eyes. Yet she was perched on the ledge as securely as its crumbling stone allowed. Beyond her lay only the chimney, which both of them could climb with little trouble, and then solid stairs began again.

She tore a strip from her garment and bound her hair with it. This reduced the already tattered covering to hardly more than a shred of cloth about her loins. She had, however, quite ceased to care about her garb as long as it included a sword-belt and her steel.

Having done with Valeria, Conan handed up his boots and weapons, then sprang high and found purchase for both fingers and toes. A moment later, he was beside the woman on the ledge.

"We'd do better with a thong or a rope to tie to all this," he said, waving a bruised and filthy hand at their scanty gear and the boots holding a lord's ransom in each toe. "Then we could draw it up afterward."

"There's not enough left of my garment for that," Valeria said. "Of course you could always sacrifice the rest of your breeches—"

"Or we could forget about those—"

Valeria put one hand protectively over the boots and the other on the hilt of her heavy dagger. Conan drew back in mock fear.

"By Erlik's untiring tool, woman, don't you know a jest when you hear one?"

"When I hear one, I do. I know not what I heard from you just now."

Conan shrugged and said no more. Valeria hoped he had heard her true meaning—that she would leave those fire-stones only to save her life. That a dead pirate had no use for loot, she would gladly admit, but she was not dead yet. Dusty-throated from thirst, hollow-bellied from hunger, filthy, all but naked, and far from home, or even from safety, she surely was— but not dead.

Then from above they heard a sound, familiar to anyone who had traveled this far south, yet strange, even unearthly in these surrounds.

Close to the cook fire, someone was beating a war drum. As another drum joined the first, the warm yellow glow of the cook fire died and darkness engulfed the voyagers in the depths.

One drum began the call to the Ichiribu of the Great Village. A second joined it, then a third.

Seyganko stood by the hearthstone as the cook-women emptied pots, gourds, and jugs of water onto the flames. They did this with sour looks at him. Not only was quenching the cook fire a dirty task, it was an evil omen. The women feared the spirits... as well as what their kin would say to cold meals.

Fortunately, they also feared Seyganko and his warriors of the *fanda* too much to disobey. Or was it Emwaya they feared? She stood by a hut on the edge of the hearthfield, arms crossed over her breasts, watching the work with an unsmiling face.

Indeed, she had not smiled since she had stumbled. Since she had told Seyganko that the hearthfield was the heart of the danger, she had looked almost an evil spirit herself. Fine work it would be if her face drove folk into the panic she feared and made more enemies for Seyganko.

Do you then think unknown spirits are nothing to be feared?

He heard the question in his mind, but used his body to reply, shaking

his head. He did not wish to reply mind-to-mind when so many other folk might suddenly demand his attention. Aondo, for one.

Aondo was a warrior in the *fanda*, and beside him stood another—what was his name? Oh, Wobeku the Swift, one who had gone with Seyganko on the raid that brought back those Kwanyi captives, who told such dire tales. Wobeku was one of the fastest runners among the Ichiribu, as well as a friend of Aondo.

Today Wobeku was not running. He stood lightly on his long legs, and it seemed to Seyganko that his eyes roved about more than was customary. Now he looked at Seyganko, now at the hearthstone— especially the lower end, where the channel fed melted fat into the earth to nourish the spirits there—and now at Emwaya. A man could not be blamed for wondering what Wobeku was seeking.

Seyganko realized that he was about to do what he had just thought unwise in Emwaya. Nonetheless—

Have you warned your father?

He needed no warning. He knows what the spirits do, as much as any man.

Seyganko's reply was a broad smile. Then he waved at Wobeku.

"Your wish, Honored One?"

"A messenger has gone to Dobanpu Spirit-Speaker. Yet he was not as swift on his feet as you. Will you take another message?"

Wobeku's smile was a mask of obedience and pleasure covering discontent that a child could have seen. Seyganko did not smile back. Whatever Wobeku had in mind, it demanded his presence here—which did not prove it unlawful, of course.

It was part of the price for the title of Honored One among the warriors of the Ichiribu. Baring one's back to treachery lest one do injustice to loyal warriors was a sacred duty. Spirits, as well as wronged kin, might avenge neglecting it.

"Good. Emwaya, daughter of Dobanpu, will tell you what to say."

Emwaya's message was short—just long enough, Seyganko judged, not to make Wobeku suspicious. The warrior saw the messenger nod, then unbind his feet, set aside all garb and girding save for his headdress, loinguard, and paint, then run. He was beyond the huts in a few breaths, outside the village wall in a few more, and out of sight before the drumming stopped.

By then, the hearthfield was empty of all but the *fanda*, Seyganko, and Emwaya. From cracks in the nearest huts, children peered, too curious to be frightened even if the earth was spewing spirit-serpents. More young ones seemed to be perched in trees and on the wall, and Seyganko heard their mothers calling them down.

Then he heard nothing more, save a swelling rumble from underfoot as the earth trembled and the hearthstone that had stood for five men's lives began to crack apart.

Even Conan's eyes took a moment to respond to the sudden darkness. For a moment, he could hear only Valeria's breathing, coming in quick pants like those of a thirsty dog. She was commanding herself well in the face of this new menace, but could not hide all of her disquiet.

Crom did not love the fearful, nor did they live long in Cimmeria. Otherwise, Conan himself might have volleyed oaths. It seemed that someone or something was toying with them, snatching away each promise of escape the moment they had come to trust themselves to it.

"Mitra's crown!" Valeria snapped. "If this is the work of the folk above, they'd best be *very* friendly when we appear. Otherwise, I'll not be."

Conan only grunted. She had spoken for both of them, and any more noise might be unwise. The folk above might not only be unfriendly, they might have listeners giving ear to what lay below.

He also did not trust this pit's walls to stand firm if shaken by loud noises. Not that they would remain unshaken if he and Valeria continued to climb—as they must—the road back now being closed. But it made little sense to shake them otherwise.

A moment later, Conan knew that his caution had had no purpose. A thunderclap tore at his ears, earth streamed down about him, and light reappeared above. Then a chunk of stone the size of a good ale barrel plummeted past him.

Without a word, Conan snatched Valeria back against his chest, then flung himself hard against the wall. Even a shallow niche might save them from being crushed like grapes in a winepress by the next stone.

The wall that had seemed to be raw earth was as unyielding as the stone of the tunnels below. Conan groped with a free hand and felt more of the same under his fingers.

Perhaps there was rock under the soil. Perhaps roots had bound the soil as hard as rock. And perhaps the binding was magical, and if the spells

vanished, the whole shaft would come down on their heads.

Another, smaller piece of stone came down, and after that, hardly more than coarse gravel. It came in a steady stream, though, mingled with clods of earth. Dust filled the shaft; Conan clapped his free hand over his face, and Valeria tried to make a mask of her hair.

It was not enough; the dust set her to coughing desperately. Nothing more fell, but Conan had guessed the truth about the listeners above. A head appeared, silhouetted against the blessed sunlight shining through the enlarged hole.

"Who goes there? Name yourselves, or be called enemies of the Ichiribu."

The tongue was close enough to what Conan had learned in the Black Kingdoms that he could understand the meaning. The voice was that of a leader and a warrior, accustomed to being obeyed. Conan saw no reason to argue at length, not when the shaft might yet come down on his head.

But he and Valeria would not begin well by seeming to be beggars. In this land, only beggars or weaklings gave their true names for the asking. Wise men knew not to give that precious knowledge to those who might work magic with it.

"We are no enemies to the Ichiribu, whatever our names. Let us climb up to you, and you may see for yourselves."

Conan could not make out the man's look, but his reply was to silently draw his head back from the opening. The brighter light showed the upper portion of the shaft clearly, in spite of the drifting dust. The mouth lay a distance *a* good ten times the Cimmerian's height, and the shaft offered few handholds.

Once there had been a stairway spiraling up to the surface. Conan saw the holes where its beams had been thrust into the walls, and even the remnants of one or two of the beams themselves. None of this was of the slightest use to him and Valeria as long as the magic binding the shaft walls did not weaken. When it did, the shaft would doubtless fall on their heads, with more stones from above to mark their tomb.

"Conan," Valeria whispered, "do we go back?"

"How?" Conan asked. "Even if we could, the folk up there have heard us, likely enough seen us, too. They'll think we were demons and block the pit. What would you wager on finding another way out before we starve?"

"And if the folk up there are cannibals—"

"They'll have to eat a fair amount of steel before they eat us," Conan said. Valeria replied with a grin, then reached into her boots and pulled out a handful of the fire-stones.

"Would it help to throw a few of these up to the watchers?" she asked.

"It couldn't hurt," Conan said. He returned the grin. "But I thought these were your hoard."

"And I thought we wouldn't need the help of the—Ichiribu, they said—to simply climb out of this demon-spawned pit!"

Conan took the largest of the stones in his hand, balanced it, then shifted slightly so that he could throw freely without falling back down the pit. Legs braced, he swung his arm in three great circles. On the fourth, his hand opened and the stone soared up the pit, a blazing green star as the sunlight struck it.

It fell outside the mouth of the pit, unheard and unseen by the Cimmerian. He knew the moment the watchers by the pit mouth saw it, however, from the outcry they raised. Hyenas fighting over carrion would have been quieter.

Conan could make out no words in that din. He could only discern what was most likely the voice of the leader, rising above the others and at last beating them down. He also heard what sounded like a woman, or a youth, apparently speaking with the leader.

Then Valeria cried out, blinking away tears, and even the Cimmerian felt lighter at heart. A stout oxhide rope with a loop at one end was dangling from the mouth of the pit.

It slid down to within a spear's length above Conan's fingertips. He cupped his hands and called up. "Too short, I fear. Another man's length will be enough."

"I'd best go up first," he told Valeria. "I speak their tongue, and some of the tribes think a woman warrior's bad luck."

"If they fill you with spears—"

"Then they'll have no fire-stones," Conan reminded her. "From the din they raised, I'd say they'll do more than hold off their spears for that prize."

What Valeria clearly wanted was to believe that nothing would happen to Conan that would leave her alone in this noisome darkness. Just as clearly, Conan could give her no real assurance, and would not insult her with a false one.

Conan pulled the looped rope over his head and set it firmly under his armpits. "Pray that these are no pygmies," he said, "or I may be down again faster than I went up!"

Then, to the folk above: "Haul away!"

"Whoever is down there knows the True Tongue," Seyganko said. "That says human to me."

"Spirits can take human form, is that not so?" Aondo offered.

Emwaya looked as if she would prefer to lie, but nodded.

"Then why not speak so?" Aondo asked.

Emwaya frowned. She had explained to Seyganko the reasons why Spirit-Speaking did not use human tongues, so he knew that the folk below had to be human. She could not explain the same to Aondo without giving the whole *fanda* too much knowledge of Spirit-Speaking.

Then the man below shouted again: "Well, are you going to haul away or not?"

Seyganko raised his club and struck it against his shield three times. On the third blow, the men on the rope began to move back from the pit.

"Heavier than a man!" someone called, taking one hand from the rope to wipe his forehead.

"Either pull or let one who will take your place!" Seyganko snapped. The man looked ready to quarrel, then seemed to think better of it and returned to his work.

If what rose from the pit that yawned where the hearthstone had stood was a man, he was larger than any Seyganko had ever seen, save only Aondo.

A closer look told the warrior that the newcomer's skin was pale under its coating of filth, his hair straight, and his eyes an eerie blue. There were tales of lands to the north that were inhabited by such blue-eyed giants, a race considered human for all that. Here, no doubt, was such a one.

"Now will you tell us your name?" Seyganko ordered.

"When I have drunk, and you have brought up my woman," the giant replied.

"Your woman?" someone asked.

"You think I travel this forest with no comforts?" the man said,

laughing. His teeth were very even and none of them filed into points. "Also, if you want more of these—" he pointed at the fallen jewel "—they are down there."

Someone clutched at Seyganko's arm. It was Emwaya, staring at the jewel as if it were a cobra about to strike. Seyganko put a hand on her shoulder and turned her around so that the giant could not see her face. Then he waved to the men to lower the rope again and shouted to the nearest hut for women to bring water.

"What is it, woman?" he whispered when he was sure that none paid him and Emwaya any attention.

"Those are Fire Eyes of the Golden Serpents," Emwaya said. Her breath seemed to come quickly, as if she had been running. "The man says they have more of them."

"So? They are fine to look at, not as fine as you when oiled and lying on a pallet, but—"

"The Golden Serpents bred in Xuchotl. The tales of the city say the folk adorned themselves with the Fire Eyes."

"Then—"

"It could be that we have taken the destroyers of Xuchotl among us!"

"We have done no such thing," Seyganko protested.

"You think we can put them back in the hole and cover them up easily if you are wrong?"

Seyganko studied the man's heavily muscled limbs, his iron weapons, and the easy, alert way he stood. "No. If they are spirits, they would not go. If they are human, they might not go and it would be unlawful to force them."

"Then *what*—"

"Have your father summon the spirits to the dance-drum. At once, before these folk have spent a night among us. The man knows the True Tongue. He may know our ways as well."

For the first time in Seyganko's memory, Emwaya obeyed one of his orders without hesitating, let alone disputing him. She ran off, for this was no message to be given to one who might take it to others than Dobanpu.

Then Seyganko stepped forward to greet the woman who rose from the pit. She was even fairer than the man, with hair the color of fresh grain and a form that a goddess would not have disdained.

She had strange-looking footwear of leather slung about her neck, and from the way she unslung it, it was heavy. Then Seyganko and all of the *fanda* saw the Fire Eyes within the footwear and it made it seem like two tiny volcanoes bubbling with molten green stone.

The warriors sucked in their breath, and some gripped weapons. The woman bringing water did more; she halted in mid-stride and barely caught the water jug as it toppled from her head. The water itself made a puddle at her feet. She looked at it for a moment, then turned and ran.

The foreign woman looked ready to draw a weapon. The giant laid a hand on her bare shoulder and smiled thinly. "You kept your promise, up to the moment when the woman took flight. I'll keep mine." Then he turned to face Seyganko.

"I am Conan of Cimmeria, a free lance." He used the word for a warrior whose vows set him apart from any tribe or clan. It was an honorable status, and claiming it falsely was heavily punished.

"The woman is Valeria of the Red Brotherhood," Conan went on. "She is a free woman, oath-bound to me. She speaks not the True Tongue, save in her heart, which I know is good. We both ask for guest-friendship among the Ichiribu, and promise to aid them as far as it is in our power to do so."

Seyganko tried not to look at the Fire Eyes. If their power had been great enough to snatch *those* from Xuchotl...

It could be great enough to make the Ichiribu rulers of all the lands about the Lake of Death, even to the slopes of Thunder Mountain. It could also cast them down more completely than Chabano or the God-Men dreamed of.

Seyganko felt a chill, as of oncoming rain, when he next looked into Conan's blue eyes.

SEVEN

Ryku had often wished to be an insect upon the wall of a conclave of the Speakers to the Living Wind, as the God-Men called themselves. Now he had all but achieved that wish. He had at last attained the self-command that let a man's presence pass unnoticed by the Speakers—or even, it was said, by the Living Wind itself.

He clung like an ape on a branch to a pinnacle of rock that forked just enough to offer a man-sized niche. One side of the fork supported his back, the other hid him from what lay below.

Eight of the Speakers were gathered in a circle around a great globe of something that could be no natural substance. The globe was as tall as a man and as clear as water, likewise seeming as hard as rock. Yet it was also light enough that two of the Speakers' servants had borne it on a litter into this cave and placed it where it now stood.

It said much about the power which the Speakers expected from the globe that the servants were mute and deaf slaves, used only for the most secret matters. Once, it was said, the Living Wind had given the Speakers spells that would silence tongues and block ears, but could also be removed when the need for them had passed. Now that knowledge was lost, and hot knives and needles served in place of magic.

That meant there were fewer of the secret servants with each passing year. The Kwanyi gave up a fair number of stout young men and women, some came from the lesser clans, others had been slaves and prisoners—all of them now in the service of the God-Men on Thunder Mountain. The clans expected that at least the free tribesfolk would be returned alive and healthy, and they were not generous even with slaves to be mutilated or slain. They had become less generous in such matters since Chabano became the Paramount Chief.

A First Speaker who could wield the ancient knowledge might gain a stronger friendship from Chabano. Or if the Paramount Chief continued to insist that he himself rule in the alliance of wizards and warriors, the First Speaker might cause the Kwanyi to turn to another to lead them.

A breeze stirred the dank air of the cave. Ryku felt it blow cool on his skin, drying the sweat on his brow. He knew that the Living Wind could be called out from its cave by sufficient Speakers' magic. It was not lawful that he know this, being only a Silent Brother, but he did, and he knew much else of the Speakers' arts. Law had always lain lightly upon Ryku, called Son of Nkuba.

Ryku had never seen the calling of the Living Wind, however. He would not have known that the Wind would be called had one Speaker not been indiscreet. Even now he wondered that the Speakers had no spells by which to learn of the presence of spies and eavesdroppers.

Perhaps that, too, was magic so ancient that living men no longer commanded it. Or perhaps the Living Wind was enough alive that it could seek out enemies itself, and punish them.

That thought so disturbed Ryku that he nearly toppled from his perch, and sweat broke out all over him though the wind grew stronger with each moment. He should not be here—and when the Wind had come and gone,

he would *not* be here.

The tunnel on the far side of the cave began to glow in the crimson and sapphire hues of the Living Wind. The light did not flicker; the swirling essence of the Living Wind was not yet in the tunnel. It could not be far, though.

Ryku licked lips suddenly as dry as month-old porridge and fought his way back to some measure of self-command.

The serving wench held out two wooden bowls to Valeria. One held salted fish, scaled, gutted, and beheaded as deftly as Valeria had ever seen in the captain's room of a waterfront tavern. The other held a pungent stew of more fish, boiled together with grain and nuts that she had never tasted. Behind the wench, a boy held a third bowl, of piping hot yams.

"No more, thank you," Valeria said. She used some of what little she knew of the Black Kingdoms' tongue. The girl seemed not to understand, only smiling and shaking her head, then holding out the bowls again.

Valeria frowned. Had the Ichiribu sent a witling to serve her and the Cimmerian? She tried patting her stomach, then holding her hands together well out in front of it. She wanted to tell the girl that she had eaten of their excellent fare nearly to the bursting point.

The girl smiled and almost pushed the bowls into Valeria's lap. Valeria raised a hand to push the girl away, then felt her wrist seized with a familiar iron grip.

"Wait, Valeria."

The Cimmerian used more Black Kingdoms' speech, as well as hand language. The girl looked at Valeria and shook her head. Conan nodded. Then girl and Cimmerian both erupted in laughter.

Valeria flushed and covered her anger by holding out a hand for the salted fish. She probably *would* burst if she ate more, certainly if she drank any more of the Ichiribu beer to wash down the fish. She would still be cursed if she would seem loutish.

The girl served Valeria, kneeling gracefully. She wore a waistcloth that revealed nearly all of a long-legged, firm-breasted figure, with the supple waist and firm arms of a girl only just turned woman. Valeria noticed that Conan's eyes roved over the girl with unmistakable admiration.

She prodded him in the ribs, nearly spraining a finger against his layered muscles. "I thought you didn't care for black wenches," she

whispered.

"Remember the ones about the fort? They file their teeth to points. These folk—their wenches look more like women and less like sharks."

"If you are so wise about woman, Conan, tell me what the wench was doing. I thought I said 'no more' plainly enough."

"Oh, you did. Then you used the gestures that said you were with child. The wench thought you needed more, for yourself and the babe."

"With child?" Valeria's jaw dropped so that she was not sure the words came out in sensible speech. Conan's grin told her that, unfortunately, they had. "I've not had a chance in years!"

"Small wonder, then, you're out of temper with men. None have shown they can tell a fine woman when they see one, so of course—"

"You clatterjawed Cimmerian oaf!" Or at least Valeria started to say that, with the intent of following it with a slap. Instead, she doubled up with laughter, upsetting her bowl. Conan patted her on the shoulder.

"Easy, woman. I was jesting."

Valeria almost wished he were not. She did wish that his hand would linger, so she reached up and held it with both of her own. She knew that Conan could break her grip as if she were a child, but she hoped he would do no such thing.

He did not. He left his hand on her bare shoulder long enough for the serving wench to raise her eyebrows, then wink at the boy. A moment later, Valeria and Conan were alone.

"They'll be listening," he whispered. "If you come closer, they'll hear nothing of what we say."

Valeria was ready to come as close as the Cimmerian could wish, but she sensed that this was not the time. She also heard a warning in his voice, and wanted to curse aloud in frustration. Had they, after all, *not* found safety among the Ichiribu?

Now the air in the cave whirled and moaned, as if it sought to flee the Living Wind and cried out in fear of its pursuer. Ryku clung to his perch with arms and legs alike, and could have wished for a tail like a monkey. All thought of concealment had long since left him.

It did not matter, for the Speakers had no care or thought to give to anything save the globe in the center of their circle. The globe... and the Living Wind they were bringing into it.

The light of the Living Wind now seemed an eye-searing flood, pouring from the tunnel like a stream in the rainy season. But no stream ever leaped like a fountain to pour downward and vanish into a globe that somehow remained as clear as a mountain pool for all the light that it swallowed.

Then Ryku saw the globe quiver, once, twice, three times. He looked at the eight-footed bronze bowl that held it, each foot of the bowl wrought in the form of a gilded fish, and saw that the bowl was also quivering. Then he blinked and spared a hand to rub his eyes, for he thought he saw pale green smoke rising from the vessel.

A moment later, the wind seemed to redouble, something that Ryku would not have believed possible. He came within a hair of losing his perch. He resumed a two-handed grip, closed his eyes... and opened them again when he smelled smoke.

Shadowy shapes now danced furiously within the clear globe, which was turning an angry crimson, with hardly a tint of sapphire. Some of the shapes might have been called human, others were serpents, still others things for which there was no name outside of nightmares... where Ryku most earnestly hoped they would remain.

But even if they came forth from the globe as living flesh, he must face them open-eyed and unflinching. How otherwise could he hope for the power of a Speaker, that would gain him what he most craved?

The smoke was rising from the bowl, and from the eight legs. The legs seemed to glow as if they had been heated over a forge, and Ryku thought he saw one of them bending. Had the weight of the globe suddenly increased out of all measure, because of the Living Wind entering it?

The eight Speakers certainly saw the smoke, and from their looks, it was obvious they knew that it meant something fearful. Or perhaps it was only the smell; when a whiff blew past Ryku, he nearly spewed.

He had barely commanded his stomach when all eight legs of the bowl seemed to melt at once. Smoke disgorged from the dissolving supports, from the bowl, and, as it seemed, from the globe itself.

Courage worthy of front-rank warriors and a lifetime of dedication held the Speakers to their task about the globe. Neither availed them against the Living Wind run wild.

The smoke vanished as if a giant mouth had sucked it all in at one gulp. The bowl and the eight legs became a bubbling pool of molten bronze, searing the eyes as would the mouth of a volcano. The globe wavered,

impossibly enough held in midair by powers Ryku dared not imagine.

Then the Speakers or their powers, or both, failed, and the globe fell. It *splashed* into the molten metal, and gobs of liquid bronze flew about. The Speakers' discipline could not hold against such pain. They screamed and leaped like monkeys beset by bees, or like warthogs attacked by driver ants.

The globe wavered again. The shadow shapes within took a more solid form—two humans, a man and a woman—and then vanished. By this time, the substance of the globe was melting down into the searing metal and feeding a great tongue of liquid fire that reached out toward the circle of Speakers.

The Speakers' silence had broken; now their courage faltered. Yet still they did not run. They opened their circle wider and held their staves with both hands at waist level. Their chanting grew louder, for all that it came from throats raw with pain and fear.

The tongue of fire gathered itself and leaped. Crimson flames as thin as the air wrapped themselves about one of the Speakers' staves. The Speaker dropped it with a cry, but it did not fall.

Instead, the flames whirled the staff up to the ceiling of the cave and held it there while they consumed it. Not even an ash drifted to the floor—but when the flames fell back, they seemed sated, like a well-fed animal.

Far worse was the feeding of the liquid metal. It, too, leaped, to land in a spreading pool about the feet of another Speaker. In a moment, the man had no feet; in another moment, no legs.

In the moment after that, knowledge of what was happening reached the Speaker's brain, as did the agony of being burned alive. Burned? Ryku wished that so innocent a word could describe what was happening to the Speaker.

The Living Wind had this much mercy: the Speaker did not take long to die. Before he began to scream, the fire had already eaten him almost to the waist. Then it swept up past his belly and to his chest, and when it ate his lungs, he fell silent.

His head bobbed briefly on the surface of the liquid fire, now shot with streaks of black as well as crimson. Then it vanished, too, and smoke in a dozen colors swirled over the metal, hiding any bubbles.

Like the flames, the liquid fire made Ryku think of a sated animal as it withdrew toward the tunnel. The crimson flames followed, and as both

elements vanished from the cave, the wind died.

The seven living Speakers stumbled out the way they had come. Some seemed blinded; they gripped the shoulders of those ahead to guide their stumbling feet. Others coughed as if mortally sick in the lungs.

Half-blinded, stifled, his own eyes and lungs assaulted by inconceivable stenches and smoke, Ryku clung to his perch until the last Speaker was gone. It would have been much simpler to let go, fall to the floor of the cave, and die a clean and natural death by breaking his head.

Simpler, and very foolish. Now there was something he had not dared to hope for: a vacant place among the Speakers. Add to this the loss of the scrying globe, with little knowledge gained from its use, and even the First Speaker would know that peril unseen in years faced the God-Men of Thunder Mountain.

If Ryku came forward to show how he might prevent Chabano from using this peril against the Speakers, he might receive a hearing. He might even receive initiation as a Speaker. Then it would be his right to wield the power of the Living Wind.

He barred his mind to the thought that in spite of all the forbidden lore he had studied, he might do no better than the Speaker who had died so brutally. If he let himself dwell on that, he *would* fall from his perch and die!

Valeria was as fine a woman as the Cimmerian had ever held this close. But he did not hold her out of passion, and what he whispered in her ear was most likely not going to make her warm for him.

"We've been gusted with food and shelter," he said. "That means we're not likely to be slain by treachery."

"You leave much unsaid," Valeria replied.

"So do the Ichiribu. I know more of their speech than I have let on, so there've been wagging tongues where I could hear. They're none too happy about where we came from, or the magic in our coming."

"What magic? Neither of us could cast a spell to so much as trim a babe's nails."

"We broke the guardian spells on the entrance to the tunnel under the hearthstone. Then we broke the hearthstone—we, or the spells as they went awry. There's too much power about us for their peace of mind."

"Sea demons drown their peace of mind! We're no danger to them.

Unless they turn us into one by trying to kill us—"

She broke off as Conan's grip tightened like iron, and he laid a finger across her full lips. "Don't even *think* that for long. There's a smell of their having a Spirit-Speaker among them."

"A what?"

Conan explained. Spirit-Speakers were no more to his taste than any other sort of magic-wielder. During his time in the Black Kingdoms, he had learned something of them, as he had learned something of every other kind of man who could be friend or foe. He owed it to this as much as to anything else that he had survived being a ruler in the Black Kingdoms, an occupation that often killed men born and bred in these lands.

"Now," he finished, at last relinquishing his grip on her, "this man's not yet our enemy. He may hope to make us friends, to him, to his tribe, or even to both. The way they talk of him, he seems to be a shrewd old fellow."

"Let him be shrewd enough to learn that we mean him no harm, and I'll praise his wisdom in songs."

"Valeria, I've heard you sing. Do you want us at blood feud with these folk, after all their cattle fall dead?"

Valeria growled. It sounded like a she-badger defending her young. Conan laughed softly. "If I said you shame the nightingale, you'd call me astray in my wits. But the truth is, our Spirit-Speaker will surely want us to help him or his folk against some foe they call the Kwanyi. I'd wager these Kwanyi hold the shores of this... Lake of Death, or so it's called."

"Do you know why?"

"No, and I'd be easier in my mind if I did. But if I start asking questions outright, I'll make these folk believe we're spies. If I tell them about where we came from, they'll think we're the ones who overthrew Xuchotl."

"We are, and not ashamed of it! Or are these folk fool enough to think that city of madmen was so great a loss?"

"Who said a word about their missing it? No, they'd no use for it, and shunned it as we might have. But they can't help wondering what magic cast it down. We speak of what we did, and... Do you want to learn what they do to witches in this land?"

Valeria's mouth opened without letting out a sound, but she shook her head. Conan wrapped his arm around her shoulders again. She eased

herself back against his chest and closed her eyes.

"Most likely we'll be put to some kind of test. It could be as simple as my bedding you before all the tribe—"

"Another jest like that and you'll be bedding no woman anywhere!"

"—or something like dancing on a drum."

"There's not a drum in the world stout enough to bear you, Conan. Surely you mean a drum-smashing contest?"

"In these lands, they make their drums large enough and stout enough for me and another to dance upon. Each man tries to make the other fall, and the one who falls dies."

Conan felt Valeria go limp in his arms, and he cursed his wagging tongue for finally scaring her into a faint. Then he heard her breathing steadily, and gently he shifted her to one arm so he could see her face.

Her eyes had drifted shut, and her mouth was slack. A moment later, the Cimmerian heard a soft burble from the full lips. He lifted the sleeping Valeria and laid her on the sleeping mat to the right of the hut's door. Then he lay down on the mat opposite, kicked off his boots, and stretched like a cat.

The Spirit-Speaker would keep his own counsel until a time of his own choosing. Valeria had the right notion about what to do until that time.

EIGHT

Valeria did not know what a Spirit-Speaker commonly looked like. Nor was this the time and place to ask, even if Conan knew. Not when the Cimmerian was talking with Dobanpu, Spirit-Speaker to the Ichiribu.

Dobanpu was no longer young, but his presence almost made Valeria forget that he dealt in potent magic. Even more, he made her unaware that she was in a cave, when she had thought she would rather be impaled than again plunge beneath the earth!

Flanking Dobanpu were a young woman with the look of blood kin—a daughter, likely enough—and an Ichiribu warrior. Even one unfamiliar with the Black Kingdoms could tell that here was a man of rank. Iridescent feathers flowed from his spear and headdress, and he wore a necklace of what seemed to be mother-of-pearl and what were most certainly leopard's teeth.

He was not of the same towering stature as the Cimmerian, but he did

not need to be. Indeed, by the way he stood and moved, he made Conan seem almost uncouthly large. He also made Valeria aware, as she had not been before, that the Black Kingdoms produced some very comely folk.

The talk now seemed to be between Conan and the young chief—Seyganko, his name was, and the daughter was named Emwaya. Valeria glimpsed another figure in the shadows of the cave and recognized the girl who had attended them and who had thought Valeria was with child.

Conan had been right about their being spied on. But then, this hardly surprised Valeria. The folk of the Black Kingdoms might live a simple life compared to Aquilonians, but they were hardly simpletons!

She turned her attention back to the two warriors. As much as she could judge, when she understood perhaps one word in ten, a challenge was being offered. It seemed that it was from Conan to Seyganko, but was Seyganko accepting or refusing?

No, he was looking at Dobanpu. The woman Emwaya was trying to catch her father's eye and Seyganko's at once—and Valeria knew that she was betrothed, wed, or at least in love with Seyganko.

Dobanpu was not returning all the looks cast at him. Indeed, he sat as silent as if he had himself become a spirit. Then he said one word, which to Valeria seemed to be a name.

"Aondo."

Seyganko's face held what had to be displeasure. Emwaya, on the other hand, appeared to be struggling to hide her joy. Valeria looked away, to make the woman's task easier. Once in her life had she felt that way toward a man, but he was dead, his bones beneath a distant reef, with the surf and the starfish alone to mourn him.

The parley seemed to be done. Then Conan half turned and whispered to Valeria, "Bow, and stretch out your arms."

Mystified but trusting, Valeria obeyed. She kept her eyes on the cave's floor long enough to count the trails left by snakes. They were the trails of small snakes, such as seers and wise-women in Aquilonia often kept about the house to give auguries and eat insects.

Seeing that bit of home in this distant land made Valeria easier in her mind, for all that she also remembered how long she had been gone from Aquilonia. She had been some years a woman and a wanderer even before she had met the man who now lay beneath the reef—and that was enough years ago that she needed two hands to count them.

Now as she knelt there with her arms stretched out, her sword-toughened muscles began to burn and her hands began to shake. Her knees also reminded her that the sand was harsh and that beneath it was hard, cold stone.

Then she felt a gentle touch at the back of her neck, draping something about her shoulders. She smelled what might have been a mixture of violets and ripe apples, if this land grew either.

"Rise," Conan said.

She rose, stretching as she did so as to ease her cramped muscles. She was proud to see that she did not tremble, let alone stagger. She also felt another kind of pride when she noticed that Seyganko was eyeing her rather as she had eyed him—and then she observed the frown on Emwaya's face as the woman saw where her man's gaze had wandered.

Dobanpu spoke again, this time calling another name—"Mokossa." The girl came from the back of the cave, and Dobanpu pointed at the cave's mouth. The girl ran to it, then seemed to halt and wait.

Conan put a hand at the small of Valeria's back and eased her along. Outside, they found that it was raining. They stopped under the overhang of the cliff to watch the rain beating the water of the lake into a vast gray expanse of tiny dancing splashes.

Valeria examined the wreath hanging around her neck. The flowers seemed dried and living at the same time, and even had it not come from Dobanpu, she would have smelled magic about it. She started to lift it over her head, but the girl Mokossa frowned and Conan put a hand on his companion's shoulder.

"Easy there, Valeria. It's safe enough, and better for you even if I lose."

"I might believe you if I knew what it was."

"It marks you as vowed to me, as this marks me the same to you."

"This" was a stout band of what appeared to be snakeskin about the Cimmerian's left wrist. By some quirk of the light, or perhaps of magic, it was in the same colors as Valeria's wreath.

"I see. Or at least I see what you are wearing. Will you tell me what you might win or lose, or leave me to guess it for myself?"

Conan frowned. "It's not easy to tell it quickly—"

"Then take as much time as you need, and half the night besides. I have nothing better to do, of course, than listen to a Cimmerian's tales."

"No, you don't," Conan agreed with infuriating cheerfulness. Again the

urge to geld him warred with the urge to laugh, and laughter won.

They sat on a fallen log that seemed to have once been roughly carved but was now half-rotted and altogether covered with moss and ferns. Conan drew a borrowed whetstone from a borrowed pouch at his borrowed belt and began to work on the edge of his sword. The blade, at least, was not borrowed.

It seemed that Conan was to submit to the gods' judgment of him by challenging an Ichiribu warrior to various contests. They would throw spears and tridents, duel with club and shield, run, jump, climb, swim, paddle canoes—

"No bedding wenches?"

"I doubt they could find enough, and a godless man is taboo to the women about here anyway."

"Is a godless woman taboo to the men?"

"You're not as godless as I am, it seems."

Valeria could think of no sufficient reply, so let the Cimmerian continue.

"I need not win every contest, but I must meet a picked warrior in every one and show skill in all. Otherwise, they may name me a man lacking the gods' favor, or even a coward."

"Small fear of that." Valeria had a sense of much left unsaid, and perhaps to remain so.

But the Cimmerian was honest, she would give him that. He frowned.

"If the gods favor me through the other contests, we end on the dance-drum. There the winner has the final blessing of the gods. The loser dies. If I win, all is well. If I lose—" he shrugged—"I suppose I'll not be king of a Hyborian realm, but that's not so great a loss."

"Not to be a king?" Had Dobanpu conjured away the Cimmerian's wits?

"A throne, woman, is something a man *sits* on.

You're an archer. You know how easy it is to shoot a sitting bird—or a sitting king."

"I've not been in the habit of shooting at kings, but you may have the right of it." Then her light tone broke. "So, Conan—if you lose—"

"I die. You live. If you don't fight to save me or avenge me—"

"I did not come here from an Iranistani harem!"

"Nor are you going to one. You must vow yourself to a new man, but you may choose him. I also think you may ask the help of Dobanpu and his daughter Emwaya. Seyganko, too, knows the warriors of the Ichiribu and seems to have a good head and heart. I'm glad I'm not to fight him. His folk will need him in the coming war."

"So who are you fighting?"

"Some stout fellow named Aondo. They say he's larger than I am—"

"They've matched you with an ape?"

"The ape would be the loser," Conan said. That again hinted of past battles against uncommon foes, but Valeria took no heart from it. What she wanted was assurance that she would not be at the mercy of the Ichiribu if Conan lost—and that assurance, she realized, was not to be forthcoming.

She took more comfort from an undoubted truth— that Aondo was not likely to best the Cimmerian in a fair battle. Was there anything she could do or leave undone to keep the fight fair?

Precious little, she realized, and some of the comfort washed away with the rain on her skin. Silently she cursed her folly in fleeing south when she had left the fort. The next time she had to flee from unwanted embraces, she would look where she was going and try not to end in a land where she knew neither law, tongue, nor custom... and was at the mercy of another's knowledge of all of them!

Ryku had not recognized the First Speaker among the circle of eight who had sought to conjure the Living Wind into the globe. Yet now the First Speaker showed signs of vast weariness in the way he slumped on his gilded stool. His eyes were cast on the lion's skin on the floor, but they seemed as vacant as if he had at last become truly blind.

—Or had seen what even those who were called God-Men were not meant to see.

As custom demanded of a Silent Brother, Ryku was prostrate before the First Speaker. He lay thus until the chill of the stone floor began to creep through his limbs toward his heart. It had to be only his fancy, but the stone seemed colder than ever before. It was as if the Living Wind had leached the warmth of the earth from all about it.

It was as well that his face was to the floor when that thought passed through his mind.

"Arise, Ryku."

Ryku could not scramble to his feet quickly enough. The chill stone had stiffened his limbs, but he contrived to rise without loss of either balance or dignity.

"I have summoned you here because the Speakers to the Living Wind have need of you."

"This is an honor I have not dared hope—"

The First Speaker held up a hand. Ryku saw that the hand was thinner and paler than it had been the last time he had seen the man. It also seemed to tremble slightly.

"Spare me your modesty. You are not unknown to Chabano, Paramount Chief of the Kwanyi." It was not a question.

Ryku judged that this moment held opportunity as well as danger. He also judged that he should hold his tongue.

"Have you promised him anything in the name of the Speakers?" This time it was a question that demanded an answer.

"I have not." Which was entirely true, Ryku not being a fool.

"Will he believe you if you promise now?"

Ryku's confusion was not altogether feigned. "What am I to promise? Chabano is no fool, as I am sure you do not need telling, First Speaker."

"Indeed, I do not need to be told what I already know. You may promise him, in my name, some part of what he has asked for but not been granted."

"What must he give us?"

"You are bold, bargaining with me."

"I speak thus only to remind you of Chabano's ways, Master. He is as bold as a leopard slipping into a cattle pen to pluck the newborn calf from its mother's teat. He is as hungry, also, and as fierce when balked of what he seeks."

"If I thought that Chabano commanded spirits, I would say he has made himself your master. A praise-speaker could not have done better."

Ryku was silent. If the old man *would* spend both their time speaking in riddles—

"But if Chabano commanded spirits, he would have done for himself much of what he has asked of us in years past. So I do not doubt that you

speak the truth as you believe it to be."

"No man can speak otherwise, Master."

The look the First Speaker gave him reminded Ryku that Chabano was not the only man who could quell disobedience or strike terror into the disloyal without raising his voice. He was tempted to prostrate himself again.

The First Speaker crossed his hands over a bronze medallion resting on his belly. "You may go to Chabano, Silent Brother Ryku. You may promise him aid from us, and ask that he tell us who has come among the Ichiribu."

"The conquerors of Xuchotl, perhaps?"

The First Speaker's look said that was something best not spoken aloud. Ryku tried to look humble.

"We have... ways... of learning this," the First Speaker went on. "Yet those who are masters of magic would know if we used these ways. They would know our powers, and that they might be in peril from us. Eyes that see and ears that hear without magic give no warning, and Chabano commands those."

Ryku now fought to look not merely humble, but surprised and admiring. In truth, he could admire one part of the First Speaker's pose. A more cunning way of pretending that nothing had happened to the seeing globe was hard to imagine.

Best I not take the First Speaker too lightly, even in this moment of triumph.

"Indeed, Chabano has often spoken of how no bird lays an egg without his knowing sooner or later," Ryku said. "I think he boasts, but he surely knows the use of spies and has them among the Ichiribu."

"Then go you and bid him use them for us," the First Speaker said. "Go, and if you return with the knowledge we seek, you may be raised to the rank of Speaker."

A new Speaker was chosen from the Silent Brothers only when an old Speaker died, and as yet there had been no word put out of such a death. Nor would there be, Ryku suspected, at least not until it became necessary to explain why Silent Brother Ryku was being honored.

It would be necessary, he swore. He would not fail, now that he had been offered as a free gift the opportunity for which he would have shed blood, and not only that of other men!

Ryku prostrated himself again until given leave to rise, then swiftly departed the First Speaker's chamber.

Chnggg!

Conan's spear sank deep into the stump that was his target in the spear-throwing contest. Sank so deep, the Cimmerian judged, that it struck a knot and rebounded. The shaft quivered so fiercely that it jerked the iron head from the wood. The spear dropped to the ground, kicking up dust.

Conan turned to Aondo and raised a hand in salute. The Ichiribu warrior had won the spear-casting contest, although by the slenderest of margins. Had it not been for that last cursed knot—

From behind Conan, Valeria strode to his side. She now wore an Ichiribu waistcloth and the wreath showing her to be his vowed woman, as well as the leather bindings on her feet. Much travel, then sunny days upon the island of the Ichiribu had darkened her northern fairness, but not otherwise marred her looks.

"What now, Conan?"

"Today, nothing more. Tomorrow, the canoe, the fish-hunting, and then at night, the drum-dance."

A shadow passed across Valeria's face. "Conan, I am as deft with a canoe paddle as any of these folk. More so than you, I think."

"Likely enough. But it's not life or death if I lose anything save the drum-dance. Aondo won the wrestling—"

"Because you *let* him win, to muddle his wits with false hopes."

"Woman!" the Cimmerian said, looming over her in mock fury. "Do I have no secrets from you?"

"No," Valeria replied with an impudent smile that made her look almost girlish. "After as much time as I've passed with you, I'd be a fool if it were otherwise."

"You're no fool, that's as certain as anything can be," Conan said. Then a disquieting thought made him frown. "Unless you've offered to paddle the canoe in my place?"

"And if I have?"

"Answer me. Have you offered to take my place in the canoe?"

"Yes."

"Crom! If only they had the wits to refuse—"

"They accepted."

Conan wanted to pick up Valeria and shake some sense into her, knew that he would shake their friendship to pieces if he did, and contented himself with a volley of oaths. It set all the birds calling, and not a few children wailing. Women, even warriors drew back from the Cimmerian, leaving him alone with Valeria, well out of anybody else's hearing.

"Did Emwaya suggest this?" he growled.

"This what?"

He struggled for fair words. "This... taking my place."

"No. She has ben not unfriendly, but we've not been among these folk long enough for me to give that kind of ear to one of them. Especially to a wizard's daughter."

"You've not lost all your wits, at least."

"What mean you by that, Cimmerian?" Valeria's voice held an edge,

"If they are letting you take my place in one of the contests, it means they regard you as a warrior."

"So?"

"A warrior of rank."

"Better still."

The Cimmerian lost the struggle to keep an edge from his own voice. "A warrior sworn to me as a blood-brother. Such may take another's place in the contest. That is the law."

"I knew—"

"Woman!" the Cimmerian bellowed. "Did you know that if you do that, you are judged along with me? That your fate marches in step with mine? If I lose the drum-dance, you die with me!"

Conan had expected anything but that Valeria would throw her arms around him, then pull his head down with a firm grip on his hair, and kiss him soundly.

"All the gods be praised! I did not know I could so easily avoid sitting and waiting to be thrown to some warrior like a bone to a dog!"

Conan decided that Valeria was actually saying what he had heard, and that neither of them had gone mad. He much doubted that if the drum-dance went against him, there would now be any tame submission

to death. Valeria was not so made.

But that submission had never had any purpose, save keeping her alive. If it was her free choice to fling herself into a last battle at his side, then so be it—and the worse for the Ichiribu if they took the verdict of the drum-dance seriously!

NINE

Valeria still did not understand much of the Ichiribu tongue. She could read faces well enough, though, and she read in all around her the common thought that she was mad.

For the tenth time since she had sat down in the canoe, she raised her paddle, letting it find its own balance in her long-fingered hands. The morning sun gilded the drops of water that fell from the paddle blade into the lake.

This morning, Lake of Death seemed a monstrously false name for such fine water. The surface sparkled, emerald-tinted with flashes of azure, and rippled softly under the light breeze. Sun flashed from the rose- and snow-hued wings of whole flocks of birds beating their way high above the island of the Ichiribu toward the distant shore.

She put the paddle down and, again for the tenth time, gently rocked the canoe to test its balance. It was as fine and light a dugout as she had ever known, both the inside and the bottom scraped and oiled until they were as smooth as the back of her hand. Smoother, likely enough, with all that she had done since fleeing that captain's embraces.

Conan was not far wrong. She might have wasted years in that dismal border settlement, until time had taken the strength and grace from her and the Red Brotherhood would no longer have her back.

Or she might have died from a fever, from a fall from horseback, or by the arrow or blade of some bandit unworthy to scrub the bilges of a Red Brotherhood ship. Died, without ever feeling a deck under her feet, seeing a sail swell with the wind, hearing the chant of rowers as they took a ship out of harbor—

She blinked and thrust the past from her. For now, she could live only from one moment to the next, from one stroke of the paddle to the next. Otherwise, Conan would have a mark against him, those with doubts of the pale-skinned strangers would rejoice, and she would have thrown her life into the scales for nothing.

From twenty paces to starboard, Aondo bared misshapen teeth in a mocking grin. Then he raised his paddle and thrust it back and forth in an unmistakable gesture.

Valeria replied in kind, biting her thumb, then pretending to throw it overboard and spitting after it. Aondo's grin wavered, then vanished as the onlookers onshore laughed. Valeria even heard one or two besides Conan shout her name as if it were a war cry.

Fifty paces to port, the two older warriors judging the race sat in the sterns of their canoes. Each of the judges' canoes had four paddlers, although one of the boats was hardly larger than the stout craft Aondo was paddling alone.

Aondo, Valeria decided, was once more determined to strut and crow like a cock on a dunghill, and much good might it do him! She had chosen a canoe that she was sure she could handle over the whole length of the race. It did not matter where else Aondo might be ahead as long as she led him past the finishing mark!

Onshore, the drums began. The Ichiribu drums were the "talking" kind, able to send complex messages, but today they had no such task. They were to spur her and Aondo on to greater efforts—and their steady, deep rumble was already reaching down into her belly, filling her as if with strong wine.

Valeria tossed her head, her hair brushed her shoulders, and the two judges raised their tridents. When those tridents came down—

Spray jetted into rainbows as the judges flung their tridents. The rainbows had not faded when Valeria's paddle plunged into the water, driving her canoe forward.

She paddled as she had learned to, head up so that her arms had free play and all the muscles of her upper body could feed the arms. Aondo, she saw, was hunched over, as if that would urge his canoe faster through the water. His strokes were not as smooth as hers, but his stout thews made them formidable.

There was not a spear's length between the two canoes as they passed the first mark. Valeria already felt sweat streaming down her face and body, and her headband growing sodden. She thanked Mitra that she had worn only the briefest of loinguards, apart from binding her hands with leather against blisters.

The race spanned six marks, about a league or a trifle more in Valeria's judgment. She had fallen farther behind than she liked by the second

mark, and by then, her hair was as sodden as her headband.

She was not gaining by the third mark—halfway along—but neither had she lost any more ground. Aondo also was dripping sweat, and his canoe seemed to be lower in the water than it had been. Was the water splashed from his vigorous strokes finding its way aboard?

The judges' canoes were keeping up well, but Valeria did not expect much of the judges. She was many things that were strange to the Ichiribu, and honor might not outweigh ignorance when it came to deciding her fate. She would do as she had done before—wager all on her own skill and strength and leave the rest to the gods.

Dip, thrust, lift, twist slightly to the other side, dip, thrust, lift, twist again. Her thigh and belly muscles joined her arms and shoulders in shrieking protests. Dip, thrust, lift, twist a little harder this time to shake sweat from her eyes, which had begun to burn as if they were filled with hot wax.

Aondo's canoe had been steering an uncertain course for some time now. His thrusts seemed almost frantic, but they had lost none of their power. His canoe was no longer settling. Had he somehow managed to bail it out when Valeria's eyes were elsewhere? Or had it been only her wishful fancy that it was low in the water?

It was no fancy that his steering was growing still more erratic. Valeria stared at the Ichiribu warrior. In a moment when he thought himself unobserved, she caught him staring back at her. The malice in that stare chilled her blood and seemed to turn the sweat upon her into ice. If he had any voice in her fate, she would be begging for death long before death took her.

Her sweat-dimmed eyes made out something else, too. Aondo was steering a course that was gradually taking him across her bow. Before they reached the next mark, she would have to either back water or strike him—and if she struck him, she would forfeit the race.

Rage did not blunt Valeria's wits. She had to surprise her opponent. Aondo was as strong as an ox, but not much quicker of thought. She wondered who had counseled him to this treachery, doubted she would learn, but knew one thing: the man was not in Aondo's canoe.

Valeria subtly altered the force and angle of her strokes so that her canoe began to drift quite as subtly to starboard. She felt a surge of strength as she saw Aondo actually slow his pace, and she knew that her deception was working. He thought she was exhausting her strength and would have no reply to his scheme.

As they approached the fourth mark, the canoes were barely a sword's length apart. Aondo was halfway across Valeria's bow now, paddling only hard enough to keep the distance. A few missed strokes and he would be lying across her path like a log.

But it was Valeria who missed a stroke, by intent, but making it seem the error of one at the end of her strength. She lost ground, but only by a few paces— then her paddle churned the water, and she shot under Aondo's stern.

Aondo screamed something that Valeria doubted was praise and stabbed wildly at the lake with his paddle. It struck the water on the wrong side, and he had completed his stroke before he realized this.

His canoe swerved sharply, until it had almost reversed its course.

Valeria was clear by then, past Aondo and into open water. She did not care if he spent the rest of the day spinning around in circles, or jumped overboard to be eaten by the lionfish and crocodiles. She only cared that the fourth mark was passing her to port, and now it was time to spend her strength freely. She would not allow herself even a moment's doubt that she still had that strength.

Her paddle seemed to dive now, then leap over the canoe to dive on the other side. Each thrust seemed to raise the canoe as well as thrust it forward. Water gurgled at the stern, spray made rainbows at the bow, and Valeria knew she was kneeling in a hand-breadth of water in the bottom of the craft.

She would not allow herself a moment to look back at Aondo, either. She was already giving the race everything that was in her. Aondo could no longer make any difference. The world shrank ever more swiftly to the endless rhythms of her paddle strokes, the water churning past, the fifth mark vanishing astern, the sixth and last now in sight—

Aondo was there again, to port now. He seemed to have no treachery left, but too much strength for Valeria's comfort. Comfort no longer mattered. Her world was no more than one stroke after another, and nothing else mattered as long as each stroke carried her toward the mark.

Was Aondo larger, meaning that he was closer? Valeria would not waste a single moment to even look. It would make no difference. None at all. She would dip the paddle, lift it, twist—and it had begun to seem that a white-hot band was locked about her waist and thighs—

"Hoaaaaa, Valeria!"

There was only one voice in the world like that. Valeria did not know if

Conan was hailing her victory or urging her to greater efforts. She had not thought she had any more strength in her, but the Cimmerian's thunderous cry proved her wrong.

She raced along in a cloud of spray, her paddle flying from side to side and up and down, almost too fast for her eye to follow. She was only muscle and sinew, bone and breath, with no human senses left in her.

"Valeria!"

She heard Conan's voice again, but this time it was almost instantly lost in the din of other voices. They were shouting her name from the shore, from the lake, even, it seemed, from the sky.

"Valeria!" The Cimmerian cut through the din. "You won!"

Valeria wanted to join the shouting. Instead, she found that her mouth seemed packed with wool. She opened it, but only a frog's croak came out. She bent forward, cautiously because she feared that her eyes would pop from her head and roll about on the canoe's bottom.

The canoe rocked and spun about. She clawed for her dagger, in the half-mad notion that Aondo was seeking to avenge his defeat by murder in plain sight of all his tribe.

Then a large, sword-calloused hand gripped her wrist and pulled her around. Conan stood beside her canoe, up to his chest in the water. With his free hand, he plucked the paddle from her grip and tossed it into the bottom of the canoe. She saw it float.

Then she saw the cloud-flecked blue sky as the Cimmerian lifted her out of the craft and carried her in his arms toward the shore. She felt the cool water of the lake soothing her feet and arms, and found the breath for a long sigh.

They reached the shore. The servant girl Mokossa ran forward with a gourd of water. Valeria sipped, fearing that her throat and stomach would never be the same again. The water stayed down, however, and she drank thirstily.

By then, she could even stand, with Conan's help. She leaned comfortably against him as the Ichiribu began shouting her name again.

In the middle of the shouting, she heard a familiar growl in her ear. "You didn't *have* to go to such lengths to have me carry you ashore! Some women haven't the sense the gods gave a fly!"

It was too much effort to even think of gelding him, and as for biting or kicking him—there was a victor's dignity to think of.

Thoughts of that dignity also kept Valeria from falling senseless, as pleasant as the idea seemed. Instead, she held out her hand for another gourd, and this time emptied it over herself.

Wobeku entered Aondo's hut with care, hands in front of him and his weapons left at the door. Aondo was not easy-tempered at the best of times, and these were anything but that.

A slave girl leaped up and ran into the corner of the hut at the sight of Wobeku. She made the sign against the evil eye as she did so.

Casually, Aondo sat up and reached for the girl. She squealed in unfeigned terror as his massive hand closed on her ankle. She did not dare fight, however, as Aondo drew her to him and across his lap.

"Wobeku does not have the evil eye. Repeat that ten times."

"Wobeku-u-u-u does n-n-not—aiyeee!"

Aondo's hand had come down hard on the girl's bottom. She squealed again and tried to wiggle free.

Wobeku cast his eyes up at the smoke-reeking shadows at the roof of the hut. It was no concern of his how Aondo treated his women. However, he did not have much time, even if the last rounds of the duel between Aondo and Conan the Tribeless had been put off until tomorrow.

The girl was rubbing her bottom with one hand and her eyes with the other when Aondo was done with her. She crawled into the farthest corner of the hut and cowered there. Wobeku wasted no sympathy on her. Had she seen any of several women who had seriously displeased the huge warrior, she would have called herself fortunate.

"She must go," Wobeku said.

"Who are you—" Aondo snarled. Then he frowned. "Only outside?"

"Yes. Did you think I was fool enough to come between you and one of your women?"

"You do not know as much as you do by being that big a fool, I must say." Aondo turned to the girl. "Go! I will send Wobeku to bring you back."

The girl did not seem much pleased at this prospect, but obeyed. Wobeku himself was hardly pleased at being called on to carry messages for this overgrown boy, whom the gods had given two men's strength and half a man's wits. Like the wench, though, he would obey, but out of hope rather than from fear.

"Aondo," he said when the two warriors were alone, "you were shamed today."

"You dare—"

"I dare repeat what all will say before tomorrow's sunset."

"Who cares what they say before sunset? After the next sunrise, no one will say anything against me. They will be too busy burning the witch-man Conan."

"You are confident."

"I am Aondo."

"Being Aondo did not make you faster than the woman Valeria."

"I know ways to slow any woman."

That much was truth. Aondo knew how to slow a woman so that she never moved again, save when her kin bore her to the burning ground.

"I know how to slow any man. Above all, the man who will dance on the drum with you tomorrow night."

"I need no such help."

"Who said anything of help? You are Aondo, who can win without help. What I offer is friendship."

"You, a friend to any man? I will tell all the Ichiribu that you have promised friendship. Then they will laugh until they choke."

Wobeku grew hot, and his hands became fists. He dared show no more anger before Aondo. He was indeed a man alone more often than not, and few would even think of avenging him should Aondo slay him here.

"If friendship is a word that rings false in your ear, call it a trading of favor for favor."

"I do not give up Valeria."

"Who said anything of asking mighty Aondo to give up his chosen vengeance?" Wobeku assumed a look of vast innocence. "She will not be harmed, I swear it. But without harming her, I can make your victory even more sure than it is already."

"Suppose you did this favor?" Aondo asked. "What do I do for you?"

Wobeku wanted to dance in triumph. The trident had sunk deep. Now to heave on the line and haul in this lionfish!

"There are many among the Ichiribu who will talk to you, but not to me."

Wobeku did not add that many of those did not talk as much to Aondo as in his presence, thinking the hulking warrior too foolish to remember what they merely said. There was truth in that thought, but not so much that Aondo would be useless as a fresh pair of eyes and ears.

"This is so."

"It is also true that sometimes I need to know about matters that people will not speak of before me. I will tell you when such matters arise. You will watch and listen, and tell me what you see and hear."

"Who else learns what I tell you?"

"The gods alone."

"Not Dobanpu?"

"Never the Spirit-Speaker, nor any of his kin!"

That was another truth. Aondo looked so relieved to hear that Wobeku was not spying for Dobanpu that Wobeku knew the big man would not think any further. The moon would turn to mealie porridge before Aondo wondered if Wobeku might be spying for the Kwanyi.

"Gods! Put me on the rack rather than let me endure this!"

Emwaya made soothing noises as Mokossa rubbed oil into Valeria's aching limbs. Conan laughed. Valeria glared.

"You'll not be laughing this time tomorrow night, Cimmerian. Aondo will take a deal of dancing down."

"Not more than I'm fit for, I'll wager."

"How much?"

"What are you wagering, woman?"

This time Valeria's glare ended in laughter. "I know what you would *have* me wager, Conan."

"Has Emwaya taught you the art of hearing thoughts?"

"Conan, some of your thoughts make such a din a babe could hear them, and I'm well past that age!"

"Indeed you are," Conan said, running his eyes approvingly over Valeria's nude form. She might say that every one of her muscles ached as if she had been racked, but nothing of this showed on the clear skin.

"Pity you can't take my place on the dance-drum," he continued. "You dance better than I, and clad as you are now, you'd fuddle the wits of a

better man than Aondo."

"I already have," Valeria snapped. "Or have you honestly forgotten that the drum-dance is man's magic among these folk? They would not take my dancing as a jest, I am sure."

Conan made a rude suggestion as to where the Ichiribu could take anything they did not like. Emwaya seemed to catch his tone, if not his meaning. She raised her eyebrows but could not hold back laughter.

At last Valeria—as slippery as an eel, her body laved with scented oil—was half-asleep on her pallet. The Ichiribu women departed; Conan sat down beside Valeria and rested a hand on her hair.

Drowsily, she rolled over, and with eyes still half-closed, nipped his hand lightly. He snatched it away and glowered at her in mock fury.

"Oh, have it your way, woman. Anyone would have thought you *cared* about what happened to me tomorrow night!"

Valeria bit her lip. "Would you believe me if I said that I do?"

"Any man who believes a woman deserves to be bitten harder than I was."

"That would not be difficult to contrive, Conan."

The Cimmerian sat down on his own pallet and kicked off his boots. "Tomorrow night we can drink late and laugh long over these fears. Tonight I'm for a good sleep."

Valeria was snoring even before the Cimmerian lay down. As Conan rolled over on his pallet, he heard a distant murmur that swelled to an angry drumming of rain on the hut.

The sky had vanished twice over, once behind the clouds and a second time behind the rain, when Ryku slipped through the darkness to meet Chabano.

He had no fear of being tracked on such a night, save by the magic of the Speakers. The rain would do for any natural enemies, and the First Speaker should guard against any idle curiosity by his underlings. If he did not, or if Dobanpu Spirit-Speaker had become curious, then Ryku's hopes of realizing his ambitions would end before they were well begun.

Ryku told himself that this bleak mood was due only to the rain, not to the promptings of spirits. Then lightning flashed, illuminating a solid figure standing against a tree. So solid did the Kwanyi chief appear that it was hard to tell who upheld whom, the tree or the warrior.

"Hail, Chabano. You came swiftly."

"Your message came in good time. Now I am here. Speak."

"I have news. I may promise more aid to the Kwanyi—"

"You will have no place among us for mere promises, Ryku."

"That is not my hope. You asked me to speak. Will you listen if I am brief?"

"You sing loudly for so small a bird."

"The honey-finder also has a loud song, and the bear does well to listen."

Chabano imitated a bear's growl, but thereafter was silent as Ryku explained what the First Speaker wished and what he was promising.

"My spies among the Ichiribu did not swear to serve the God-Men," Chabano said at last.

Ryku wished the spies' oaths devoured by lionfish, but aloud said only, "Then can they not swear new oaths? If they are wise enough to be your spies, they must also be wise enough to know that the God-Men mean the Kwanyi no harm."

"I myself do not know that," Chabano said. "Or do you say I lack wisdom?"

Ryku judged that almost any words he spoke now were likely enough to be his last. He shrugged instead.

Chabano laughed. It was laughter that drowned out the rain and even warred against the thunder. "I do not *know* much about the God-Men," he said at last. "But you will tell me more, true?"

Ryku nodded.

"I rejoice. And my spies swore oaths to me, so they will obey even if it aids the God-Men. Did. you not know that?"

Ryku confessed ignorance.

"Then you have as much to learn about the Kwanyi as I have about the God-Men. Perhaps more.

Remember that, and guard your tongue when next we meet."

Ryku was ready to swear potent oaths to do so when he realized that he was about to swear to the darkness. Chabano had vanished, as silently as a cobra for all that he more resembled the honey-seeking bear.

TEN

The verdant hills on the western shore of the Lake of Death had long since swallowed the sun. Now moon-silvered clouds were swallowing the stars. A wind blew from the lake onto the island of the Ichiribu, gentle for now, but with a hint of strength to come.

On the summit of the highest hill on the island, Conan stood on one side of the dance-drum, contemplating Aondo standing on the other side. Both wore no more than loinguards, leather braces on their ankles and wrists, and looks of grim determination.

At least Aondo had donned such a look. Conan had merely allowed his face to assume its natural expression, which others had told him was grim enough for any occasion.

"You look ready to challenge the gods themselves if they give you half an excuse," a woman had told him some years ago in a distant land. She had intended it as praise, being one who doubted the gods' very existence.

Conan's own beliefs did not go that far. He merely doubted everything the priests said about the gods, and waited for the gods to speak for themselves. As they had so far remained silent, he felt he had good cause to rely on his own skill and strength.

He took on a more lighthearted expression and studied Aondo. The man's wits were nothing to boast of, but his look of being as slow as a mired ox was deceptive. Conan had seen too much of Aondo's swiftness in their previous contests. Also, Aondo knew the art of the drum-dance from boyhood, while Conan's life—and now Valeria's, curse the woman!—hung upon the Cimmerian's learning it within a few moments.

There was nothing more to learn about Aondo. Conan turned his attention to the drum itself.

It was a monstrous creation, a rough circle a good twenty paces across. The drum-frame was made of timber stout enough for building a war galley or the roof of a temple. In the torchlight, the drumhead had the russet hue of well-tanned oxbide, but a sheen as of tiny scales hinted of some other origin. Knowing how many strange beasts this part of the jungle seemed to harbor, the Cimmerian refused to let this unsettle him. If the drumhead would support his weight until he had won life and freedom for himself and Valeria, he did not much care if it was made of the hide of creatures from the moon!

From behind the circle of onlookers, Dobanpu and Seyganko stepped forward. Conan though he saw Emwaya and Valeria somewhere in the

circle, but the crowd was too thick for him to be certain. It seemed that everyone who could walk or be carried had contrived to be here tonight, from babes in arms to venerable grandsires.

The wind gusted, and the torches flared, their smoke coiling serpentlike about Conan. He smelled exotic resins and herbs, like nothing he had encountered in the Black Kingdoms. The tribes of the Lake of Death, he would wager, were apart even from their kinsfolk nearer the coast.

Time to learn more about them when he had won. He raised his arms and clasped his hands over his head in the signal that he was ready. Aondo did the same.

From somewhere beyond the circle of torchlight, a drumming began. It was not that of one of the great talking drums, this one—it might have been a child tapping away. But it was the ritual signal for the dancers to take their place.

Conan found the notched timber that served for a ladder, but disdained it. Instead, he gripped the edge of the drum, flexed at the knees, and soared onto the drumhead in a single leap.

The drum boomed like all the drums of all the war galleys in all the fleets of the world sounding the stroke at once. It seemed to Conan that the flames of the torches themselves froze for a moment. Certainly he could read surprise on every face... including Aondo's.

The Ichiribu champion at least had the wits not to attempt Conan's feat. He climbed by way of his notched log, and only then leaped into the center of the drum.

Once more the thunderous booming rolled out across the hilltop until it was lost in the darkness over the lake. Conan rode the drumhead by again flexing his knees, for now the art seemed no more difficult than balancing oneself on a ship's deck, easier than standing on the back of a horse. He did not expect it to remain that easy.

Wobeku watched with a sober eye as the two dancers began the serious work of the night. He doubted that Aondo's greater experience would outweigh his natural arrogance. Nothing could keep him from underestimating his opponent—and against this Conan, that would be folly.

So much the better. The more Aondo owed to Wobeku, the more pliant a tool in the hands of Chabano's spy the warrior would be. The more tales Wobeku could bear to the Kwanyi chief, the higher his place when the

other tribe at last ruled the lands about the Lake of Death.

Wobeku patted the pouch at his belt. It seemed the common warrior's pouch, which might contain a spoon and eating gourd, a bone needle and sinew for mending garments, or a few strips of sun-dried meat and salted fish.

It contained all of these things, to deceive the casual searcher. Below them, it also held the two lengths of a short blowgun and a fish-skin pouch of darts for it.

The blowgun was not the man-tall weapon of the tribes of the forests to the south. Its range was less than half that of a good spear-throw. But it would not need range tonight, when its victim suspected nothing.

Nor would it need to do more than pierce her bare skin for the poison to do its work. The art of keeping cobra venom potent in the air was known only to the God-Men, and the darts were part of their gifts to Chabano. A *small* part, considering that Wobeku had only three darts. Was the spell for preserving the venom so difficult to bring about, or were the God-Men merely being closefisted with their magic as was their custom? Yet when one dart would do the work, three should be ample. The prey would suspect nothing, and cobras were not so rare on the island that anyone would suspect more than ill fortune, until it was too late. Too late for both Wobeku's prey and her bond-mate on the dance-drum.

The breeze now held a chill hint of yet more rain. Conan was sweating in spite of this. So was Aondo, and the sweat of both men was pouring onto the already-smooth drumhead, causing their footing to be even less certain.

More than Aondo's sweat was making the Cimmerian fight to remain on his feet. At unpredictable intervals, the Ichiribu warrior would fling himself down on his knees, or even on his belly, then slap the drumhead with both massive hands to begin his rise. These gestures gave the drumhead whole new kinds of movement, also unpredictable.

Conan himself foreswore such tricks. He learned swiftly that no movement of the drumhead put him in much danger of losing his footing... as long as he was prepared for it, at least, which meant feet well spread and legs ready to be either loose or rigid, as the drumhead demanded.

The drum-dance was unlike anything the Cimmerian had done before. But it called on skills that he had honed for a good few years, until they

were as keen as the edge of his broadsword. From the yarn of these skills, he could weave victory.

Or at least he could avoid defeat. With his fine tricks, Aondo was wasting strength that Conan was saving. Yet the warrior seemed no slower or weaker than he had at the beginning of the duel. What, Conan wondered, would be the judgment of the Ichiribu if the drum-dance ended with both men still on the drum, unable to move a finger?

He laughed, and laughed again when he saw that this made Aondo frown. No doubt the man was cudgeling his wits to guess what trick the Cimmerian might be preparing. Conan laughed a third time, at Aondo's folly. The man would only take his attention from his opponent's next move, which was the surest way to lose.

For Conan, the world had shrunk to the drumhead and the man who stood on it with him. So had his concentration on his foe always been foremost in a fight for life, since he was old enough to win by skill rather than by sheer youthful strength, and perhaps with the favor of merciful gods. So it would be tonight.

Conan leaped high, twisted in the air, came down on all fours, and rolled. Rolling, he rolled again onto his hands and knees, thrust hands and feet hard against the drumhead, and rebounded into the air. When he landed, he was standing again.

He was also close to the edge of the drum. Aondo gave a ragged roar of triumph as he saw victory glimmering close. He, in turn, leaped insensately, making the drumhead dance madly.

Conan deliberately allowed the movement of the drumhead to shift him perhaps a spear's length toward the rim. He was in no danger from anything save the frame giving way. By custom, that ended the duel until the carpenters had finished repairing the timbers.

Aondo, however, was in danger of exhausting himself if he continued to leap about like a flea on a hot griddle without driving Conan off the drumhead. He seemed to have forgotten an ancient law of fighting: do not, if you can help it, wager your chances of victory on something you can do only once.

Just as deliberately, Conan shifted his footing, so that now the leaping drumhead slowly pushed him away from the rim. The thunder of the drum was outshouting the wind; soon it would outshout any thunder roaring down from above. Conan wondered how the folk watching could bear the sound, and saw that they had indeed widened their circle.

Valeria and Emwaya were standing side by side now, within arm's reach of one of the torches blazing atop poles thrust into the ground. Conan spared Valeria a glance and a wave, saw her return the wave, then whirled to see Aondo trying to close the distance between them.

It broke laws, customs, and taboos of every kind for one dancer to touch another. Yet crowding close to your opponent was allowed. If it gave him less space to move, it might even give you victory.

It might also provoke him into striking you, thereby losing. Conan would wager much that some such thought was in Aondo's mind. Yet the warrior had his face set in a sweat-dripping mask of such ferocity that it appeared he might be ready to strike the first blow.

Conan saw this plainly, then set the notion aside. Such a victory would not be honorable or give him and Valeria a sure place among the Ichiribu. Also, Aondo might be too good a warrior to die merely because he could not guard his temper.

If Valeria's fate had not been linked to his own, the Cimmerian would have utterly rejected the notion. As it was, he would leave such a trick for when he might truly need to save both himself and his companion.

Aondo had closed the distance still more in the time Conan had needed to decide. Now the Cimmerian could almost reach out and touch him. Aondo was too tall to leap over, so Conan waited until the warrior leaped.

Then he stamped hard, both feet thundering on the drumhead. Aondo came down on the vibrating hide, swayed, and in struggling for balance, turned away from Conan.

The moment his opponent's eyes were elsewhere, Conan took his longest leap of the duel. He came down six good paces on the other side of Aondo. Now it was the warrior who had his back to the edge of the drum.

Conan opened the distance still more, seeing Aondo again ready to lash out in madness and fury, thereby ending his life with dishonor. Then, just as the Cimmerian thought the madness seemed to be ebbing from the warrior's face, a woman's shrill scream pierced the drum-thunder.

Valeria was standing beside Emwaya, eyes fixed on the drum, when she felt rather than saw the young woman move. Emwaya seemed almost to float two or three paces without touching the ground. As she came into Valeria's sight, the pirate saw that Emwaya's face was drawn.

Then, suddenly, Dobanpu's daughter broke into a sweat equal to that of the two duelists, threw up a hand, seemed to pluck something from the

air, and screamed.

Valeria drew sword and dagger with deadly speed and scant regard for those standing close. A circle opened around her and Emwaya, as if the Ichiribu wizard's daughter had suddenly burst into flames.

Instead, Emwaya was staggering, shaking her hand, and opening and shutting her mouth without making a sound. Valeria saw her eyes roll up until only the whites showed, then saw her fall to her knees, hands shaking uncontrollably, arms beginning to spasm.

"Snake!" someone shouted.

Valeria whirled, trying to look in all directions at once and slash to pieces anything that looked remotely like a serpent. As she did so, she saw a red, swollen patch on Emwaya's hand—the hand, she recalled, that Emwaya had used to pluck something from the air.

Instantly, Valeria altered the object of her search. She was not looking for a man or a weapon. Rather, she was looking for a certain cast of countenance. Assassins had a look that was hard to mistake for anything else. Assassins who had just struck down the wrong person had an even more distinctive look, unless they were adepts of a kind she did not expect to find among the Ichiribu.

She found a face that bore that look, a face she recognized, although she could not put a name to it. The man was frantically scrabbling to hide an object he held in his hands behind the women in front of him.

Valeria knew what fate awaited her and Conan if she slew an innocent from the ranks of the Ichiribu. So she reversed her dagger and threw it hilt-first. The hilt was of the best Nemedian artistry, with a weighted pommel intended to do just such work as she had put it to.

The man—Wobeku, she remembered his name now—saw his danger in time to avoid the worst of it. He ducked, the dagger struck a glancing blow and flew off into the crowd, and a cry warned Valeria of trouble to come. For the moment reckless of danger, she raised her sword and screamed curses and warnings in every tongue she could command.

The Ichiribu might not understand, but they knew a madwoman when they heard one. They made a path for Valeria, where she wanted it. She lunged forward just as Wobeku raised what had to be a blowgun.

Neither steel nor blowgun dart found its mark. Golden fire was suddenly all about her, raining from the sky like water. Her blade seemed to slice deep into a thick wall of honey, and eye-searing sparks flew from the steel.

At the same moment, the golden fire wrapped itself around something small, which had to be the dart hurled at Valeria. It had no metal in it, let alone good Aquilonian steel; it emitted a pale green flash and was gone.

Then the golden fire arched high, forming a bow linking Emwaya's hand to the blowgun held by Wobeku. It was Wobeku's turn to show the whites of his eyes, and also to drop the blowgun and take to his heels.

The golden fire brightened until Valeria had to first squint, then close her eyes. It brightened still more until she wanted to drop her sword and clap her hands over her face. She heard screams all around her, and hoped none of them were Emwaya's.

As the golden light poured over the hilltop, Conan was sure of two things: Aondo had known of the treachery; Dobanpu was at work fighting it.

The warrior danced all around Conan, maneuvering the Cimmerian so that he had to either face the light or turn his back on his opponent. That would have mattered little in most fights; the Cimmerian's hearing could all but pick out the fall of a single leaf.

Now the footfalls of his enemy were lost in a din that seemed like the end of the world: the drum booming, the crowd screaming in fear and rage, and thunder that seemed to rise from the earth as well as roll from the sky. Conan closed his eyes, drew in a deep breath, and judged Aondo's position from the reek of the man's sweat.

His judgment was flawed, but good enough. Aondo brushed the Cimmerian's arm. In that moment, he might have gripped and thrown Conan with none to see it. Aondo's wits were unequal to such a stratagem. He had been led to expect a helpless opponent, but had found Conan nothing of the kind, and his own vision dimmed as well.

Then the golden fire diminished until the human eye could endure it. Conan opened his eyes, sprang high and to one side, and deliberately dropped to his knees.

Aondo gave a bull roar, mingling fury and triumph, and hurled himself at the Cimmerian. A gasp of horror at the broken taboo rose from all around the drum.

Conan did not meet Aondo body to body. Instead, he dropped even farther, slamming the drumhead with his massive chest. Aondo's balance vanished. He tried to recapture it by flinging himself forward, on top of Conan, who turned a complete somersault that took him forward out from

under the warrior's lunge.

The big tribesman saw that nothing would save him from going over the edge. This time his roar was pure fury. In turn, he somersaulted as he flew over the rim of the drum. He landed almost between two spear-armed warriors rushing forward to restrain him.

They might as well have tried to restrain a mad elephant. One gigantic fist broke a spear with a single blow, another stretched the other warrior senseless on the ground. Aondo kicked the fallen man in the ribs for good measure, then put his head down and plunged through the crowd.

Even the warriors gave way for him, but closed ranks again to bar Conan's path as the Cimmerian leaped down from the drum in pursuit. He raised a fist, ready to add to the numbers of those lying senseless.

Valeria pushed through the crowd from the other side, with some help from the hilt of her sword and a deftly wielded elbow. Then she yelped in surprise as Conan threw his arms around her.

"Gods above, Conan! You're worse than the rack *or* Mokossa with the oil!"

He held her at arm's length, staring into her eyes to be sure that reason and life still burned there. Then he laughed raggedly.

"That scream wasn't yours?"

"Not the first one, at least. It was Emwaya crying out. She caught a poisoned blowgun dart aimed at me."

Conan felt strength flowing back into his limbs, but his wits seemed as slow as Aondo's. "Darts?"

"It was Wobeku," Valeria said, then continued with an explanation that gradually penetrated Conan's understanding. By the time she was finished, he had regained not only strength, but breath.

"Where's my sword?"

"Conan—"

The Cimmerian picked Valeria up with a hand under each armpit and held her with her feet off the ground. "Woman, I asked for my sword. I wish to use it to kill Aondo and Wobeku. Is that so hard to understand, or have you taken something to addle your wits?"

Valeria threw her head back and laughed until Conan had to join her, which broke his grip. She landed lightly and turned.

"Conan, here is your sword."

It was Seyganko holding out the Cimmerian's blades, belt, and sheathes. Behind him stood a half dozen Ichiribu warriors, none of them carrying less than two spears and a trident, and many carrying clubs, throwing sticks, or cords with stones knotted into the end.

Conan's first thought was that he had forfeited his life in some way, and that they were handing his weapons back to him so that he might wage an honorable fight at the end. Then he saw that the bleak looks of the warriors were not aimed at him. All except Seyganko's, at least.

Conan prudently armed himself before speaking. "Seyganko, I hope I may join your warriors in pursuing those dishonorable—"

"The Ichiribu will judge their dishonor even more harshly than you, I swear," Seyganko said. Indeed, he swore several oaths that Conan knew well to be highly potent in the Black Kingdoms, and several more the Cimmerian did not know but which rang true.

His help in the pursuit would plainly be unwelcome. What else was there to do?"

"How fares Emwaya?"

Seyganko seemed to struggle for self-command. Then: "She is in the hands of her father and the gods. It would have been an easier matter to heal her had Wobeku not dropped the weapon that wounded her. It would also have been child's play to destroy him."

The fallen weapon of Wobeku was something the Cimmerian did not altogether understand. But then, the whole thing reeked of magic, so perhaps he lost nothing thereby. He resolved not to treat Wobeku as helpless prey merely because the man was weaponless, and continued his attention to Seyganko.

"As it stands, Wobeku has fled," Seyganko continued, "and Emwaya lies without suffering, but also in much danger in spite of her father's best skill. If you think your gods have power in this land, pray to them."

Conan nodded. Seyganko lifted a hand, and one of his warriors gave him a spear. "I swear by this weapon—this bringer of death to the treacherous—that I will not harm you or your shield-woman. Whatever comes of tonight, you and she may leave these lands unharmed. But if Emwaya dies, do not think to find a friend in me, or in any who follow me."

Seyganko whirled then, as lightly as a dust devil of the Kozaki steppes. The band strode off into the darkness, which seemed twice as deep now that the golden fire was gone.

Wobeku ran as though the Living Wind was howling at his heels. He knew that there would be no hiding on the island; the women and children would gladly join the hunt for him if necessary. Indeed, imagining what the women would do to him if Emwaya died nearly made him stumble.

He prayed, as much as he had the breath to do, that he would either reach his hidden canoe or that the warriors would catch him before the women did. He crossed the ridge above the north shore of the island before he realized that his prayer had been answered. Now it was all downhill to the canoe.

The easier going made it possible to trade speed for silence. It was hard to believe that any warriors could have crossed the island in time to be beating him to the shore, but men often died from what they did not believe. Wobeku kept away from the trails, and from slopes with loose stones or thick brush that might betray him with the sound of his passage.

It helped more than a little that halfway down the slope the rain began in earnest. The lightning flashed about him as brightly as the golden spirit-fire Dobanpu had hurled.

The God of Manhood deliver him! He had missed both victory and death so narrowly that he wanted to howl like a hyena at the thought. Had Emwaya not caught the dart, Valeria would now be dead. Dobanpu would never have spoken to the spirits for her, and her death would have been the end of Conan. Even had they not been spirit-bonded, clearly the two were vowed companions, and the heart would have gone out of the big man, leaving Aondo with an easy victory.

Had Wobeku not then dropped the blowgun, however, Dobanpu would have turned the death tearing through Emwaya's body back on him! *He* would be dying the death of the cobra's bite, knowing—if he knew anything—that when he breathed his last, the whole tribe would be cheering and drinking ale, Emwaya most of all!

He did stumble, in fear and fury, and nearly went full length on the rain-slick ground. The misfortune was his salvation, though.

From where the canoe was hidden, two boys sprang up, spears held ready. They were just old enough to guard the flocks and carry the lesser spears, the *bidui* boys, as the Ichiribu called them.

It was taboo for a full warrior such as Wobeku to slay them, or even to fight them. Wobeku had not broken any taboos as yet tonight, as Valeria was clanless, if not a witch. He also did not care to start making any

transgressions now. Worse things than being given to the women would come to him if he slew these boys, and most of them would come after he died.

Wobeku crept forward with his hunter's skill, using the bushes for cover, and also to protect himself somewhat from the rain still pouring down. The thunder and rain drowned out any sound he made.

Closer to his canoe, he saw that the craft was safe, even if half filled with rainwater. A smaller canoe was drawn up on the shore next to it. The boys must have been caught in the downpour and paddled for shore, then seen the hidden canoe and thought it marked a secure landing place.

Bold boys, to be out on the lake after dark, especially on a night like this, with a drum-duel being fought on the hill. They would not frighten easily. Did he have anything with him—?

The brush crackled and crunched behind Wobeku, as if a great stone was rolling downhill. He looked behind him, nearly fell out from beneath the bush, and cursed aloud.

Aondo was stumbling down the hill, blood running from half a score of cuts. He must have run blindly into a thorn thicket at some point in his flight, for he was not only bloody, but next to naked. He held a spear in one bloody hand, and a club was thrust through the belt that was nearly his only garment.

The *bidui* leaped up as Aondo burst into the open. Both boys raised their spears, and one also unslung a stone-rope tied around his waist.

"Give me that canoe," Aondo said. At least that was what Wobeku thought he said; it sounded more like a beast's growl than a human's voice. The boys looked at the big man as if he were indeed less than human, and therefore something that they might have to fight.

It happened in the space between one breath and the next. The *bidui* with the stone-rope began to whirl it about his head, while his comrade stepped forward. He held his light spear aimed boldly at Aondo's chest, hoping to give his friend time for a good cast. Perhaps he also hoped to penetrate Aondo's madness and remind him of the taboos.

Aondo's fist smashed into the boy's face. The youth flew backward as if tossed by an ox. The sound of his skull striking a rock on the shore was even louder than the crashing of the thunder, or so it seemed to Wobeku.

The second boy made his cast, but the rope only caught Aondo's arm and the stone bounced harmlessly against the big man's chest. Aondo tossed his spear to his unhampered hand and flung it. The boy died,

pinned to a tree like a mouse pierced by a snake's fangs.

Wobeku gave Aondo no time to savor victory or to lament the doom he had earned. The smaller man burst from his cover, covering the ground toward the shore in strides that were almost leaps.

Half-mad as he was, Aondo still sensed another's presence. Both strength and speed had left him, though. He could do no more than draw his club and begin to raise it before Wobeku flung his own spear.

It pierced Aondo's belly, and the warrior's breath hissed out of him. Then he gripped the spear-shaft and seemed to realize what it was, and where it was.

Wobeku, meanwhile, reached his canoe and slashed at the vine rope. It parted, he lifted the paddle and thrust at the water, and Aondo gave a cry such as the ears of men were not meant to hear, nor likely enough the ears of the gods, either. Then the big warrior leaped from the bank straight into the stern of Wobeku's canoe.

The canoe shattered like a stick struck with an ax. Aondo plunged under the water, then thrashed to the surface, blood and splinters spreading around him. Wobeku flew through the air, landing headfirst in water so shallow that he nearly dashed his brains out on the rocks at the bottom.

Aondo screamed now at the pain of his belly wound. Then he screamed again as something vast, dark, and long slipped out of the night and gripped him around the waist. He rose half out of the water, arms thrashing wildly at what held him; he even pulled the spear from his belly and thrust it down.

Nothing helped. Spray mingled with the rain as the crocodile thrashed its tail, moving away from the shore. Aondo went with it. For a moment, his chest and head were still above water, then only his head; then Wobeku heard a gurgle and saw nothing but a swirl of foam.

Wobeku staggered out of the water, knelt on the shore, and spewed. When he could stand, he could see only the rain and the *biduis'* canoe. It was small even for him, and would never have held Aondo, but Aondo would never again need a canoe.

Wobeku did. No one on the island, after the boys' bodies were found and no sign of Aondo was seen, would doubt that it was Wobeku who had cursed himself by the three deaths. Out on the lake, Wobeku would not need to submit to any judgment save the gods'. They knew that he was innocent, at least of the boys' blood.

If the gods knew anything, which was a question Wobeku did not expect to have answered tonight. He slid into the canoe, tested the balance of the boy-sized paddles, cast off the vine, and pushed hard away from the shore. By the time he had settled to a steady rhythm, sign of the shore itself was lost in the rain. Wobeku was alone with the lake, the gods, and his fear of what Chabano would say of this night's work.

The clay jug in the corner of the hut held good ale—almost as much as it did when it had first arrived this morning. Conan's throat was as dry as the Iranistani uplands, and he doubted that Valeria's was otherwise, but neither of them seemed ready for drink stronger than water.

A clear head for a fight was always as well, but had they to fear any more fighting tonight? Conan trusted Seyganko, who had sworn oaths it would shrivel a man to break that the Cimmerian and Valeria would not be harmed even if Emwaya died.

Conan was not much for prayers, but what few he remembered of how to remind the gods that somebody needed help, he was muttering to himself. Valeria had prayed aloud to all those gods lawful in her native Aquilonia, and was now embarked on prayers to the gods of Shem and Zingara.

Whether she believed or not, she was praying so fiercely that even a god could likely enough not tell the difference. Also, Conan thought that even a god would think twice before rejecting a prayer uttered by anyone with such a look upon her face.

Footfalls loud enough to challenge the rain thudded outside. A war party coming for them after all? Conan laid his sword across his knees, saw Valeria do the same, then realized that it was only two pairs of feet. The rain had slackened.

"Enter!" he called, his voice sounding like a dotard's. He pointed at the beer jug and the cups, and Valeria was filling the cups when the grass curtain at the door parted and Seyganko and Mokossa entered.

One look at their faces told Conan the news they brought. He leaped up, feeling as if he could dance down Aondo all over again and then hunt Wobeku all the way to the sea. He gripped the visitors' hands so hard that the girl squealed, and even Seyganko fought not to wince.

"Yes, it is true. Emwaya will live, heal, and be my bride."

"How fares her father?" Valeria asked. "I owe him my life, too."

"It will be as well if the Ichiribu need no Spirit-Speaking for some days,"

Seyganko said dryly. "This night has not ended as we had expected when it began."

"Meaning that Conan and I aren't dead?" Valeria snapped. Conan put a hand on her shoulder; she shook him off.

Seyganko looked genuinely ashamed. "My tongue fails me in my time of need. No. We wished Conan to win. But we did not wish such disorder among our folk." He seemed to need his spear as a staff for a moment.

"Aondo and Wobeku have both fled. In their flight, they killed two *bidui* boys and stole their canoe. We must find the taboo-breakers, or their spirits will curse the Ichiribu. Our fields on the island and the mainland alike will be barren. Our cows will go dry. The fish will swim downriver, beyond our reach."

He went on reciting a litany of disasters until Mokossa boldly gripped his arm. "Oh," Seyganko said as if suddenly awakened from a daze. "There can be no welcoming feast, not until the taboo-breakers are taken. But the gods will forgive us for offering you and your shield-woman companions, for this night and for any other nights as you may choose."

Conan held laughter inside; Seyganko was clearly in no merry mood. Now he knew why Mokossa had interrupted Seyganko's lamentations... and also whom she intended that Conan's partner should be tonight.

Then the Cimmerian could not hold back laughter, because Seyganko was gazing at Valeria as if she were a rather distasteful duty that he must perform for the good of his tribe. Mercifully, Seyganko had enough sense to join in the laughter instead of taking offense.

"My thanks to the Ichiribu, and I mean no insult to their fine women, not to any of them," Conan said. "But my shield-woman and I are vowed, as I have told you. Also, we know each other's ways."

"May we at least send more beer?" Seyganko seemed to be almost pleading as he looked at Valeria.

"As you wish," Conan replied. He glanced at the door-curtain, and in a moment he was alone with Valeria. A Valeria who had, while his back was turned, removed the waistcloth that was her only garment. He saw nothing he had not seen a score of times before... but now, for the first time, it made his blood sing.

He stepped forward; Valeria held up one hand. He gripped it, and she pressed her other hand hard against his chest.

"You are going to have to prove that, you know," she said as he drew her closer.

"Prove what?"

"That you know my ways."

He laughed and kissed her, and this time, her lips opened under his. "We have all night. If I don't know them at first, by Erlik's brass tool, I'll know them by morning!" He lifted her, and she nestled against his chest for a moment before raising her face for more kisses.

ELEVEN

Something's taken the bait," Conan said.

Valeria sat up in the stern of the canoe and reached for her trident. She was clad in an Ichiribu waistcloth, a necklace of lionfish teeth, and a broad hat made of leaves tied with vine to a reed frame.

Conan squatted amidships, letting the fishing line feed over the side. He wore a leather binding to protect his hand from the flax-and-sinew line, a loin-guard, and a dagger. His sword and Valeria's, as well as her bow, lay in the bottom of the canoe, wrapped in fish skin, inside oiled leather, inside waxed linen.

Neither of them cared to leave their weapons ashore on such an expedition as today's. Nor did they care to risk them rusting or taking up dampness. Wobeku might not be the only traitor among the Ichiribu, and there were still warriors with doubts about the two strangers. The nearest smith who could replace, or even repair their blades was at least a month's travel from the Lake of Death.

At last the fish finished its run. Conan braced himself and began hauling it in. Valeria crouched, trident ready, its line coiled lightly in the stern and knotted firmly to a peg driven into the bottom of the canoe.

The fish was a fighter, but Conan wasted no time playing with it. He judged the line would bear any strain the fish could put on it, and hauled away with a will.

Ripples spread around the canoe as the fish's thrashing reached the surface. Valeria's eyes roved about, watching for the first patch of scales large enough to give her trident a mark. Her movements lifted her breasts in a way Conan would have found agreeable, had he spared attention for such matters now.

Suddenly, the fish leaped. The trident was as swift, and blood and foam took the place of the ripples as the fish thrashed out its life an arm's length

from the boat. With Valeria gripping the tail and Conan the head, they heaved it aboard, a *grisku*, as the tribe called it—a third the length of the canoe and weighing as much as a newborn calf.

Valeria made a face as the *grisku* gave its last wriggle. "All that work for one of those? You know they taste like glue."

"The Ichiribu like them, so we won't have to eat it. Besides, you know well that the more fish we bring back, the less anybody will suspect us."

"I trust the Ichiribu. Don't you?"

"Most of them, yes, as much as I trust any foreigners when I'm nearly alone among them. It takes few enemies to make trouble then."

"In that case, let us make our enemies fewer, Conan. You've been hammering the idea of our fighting the Kwanyi into my ears night and day."

"Not every night, Valeria. Some nights we've passed otherwise."

She sniffed. "If I do lower myself to take a great loutish Cimmerian to my bed, the least he can do is not to throw it in my face by daylight."

"Where would you have me throw it?"

Valeria made a vulgar gesture and gave an even more vulgar reply. Then she laughed. "I've no quarrel with the Ichiribu, and we'll reach the sea faster if we wait until the rains. A war with the Kwanyi seems as good a way of passing the time as any."

"Better than most. If half they say of Chabano is true, his eye is on an empire. That could bring him down on my old friends toward the coast if he goes unchecked."

"They're not my friends," Valeria protested, but to Conan the protest seemed feeble. Like him, she was one to think twice before walking away from a good fight, even more so when one owed a debt as she and he did to the Ichiribu.

Moreover—

"I've been thinking," he said. "If Dobanpu thinks it well, we can explore the tunnels beyond the Ichiribu island. If they reach to the Kwanyi shore of the lake, we can climb into Chabano's bedchamber some night."

"What of the Golden Serpents?"

"What of them?" Conan asked, shrugging. "With enough good men at our side, no serpent will pass. Besides, the more Golden Serpents, the more fire-stones."

"Indeed." For a moment, Valeria's blue eyes seemed to take on a greenish hue as her pirate's soul warmed to the thought of such booty.

Geyrus, the First Speaker, assumed the pose of meditation. Out of respect, Ryku did the same. He doubted that the gesture would deceive the First Speaker, but it might delay an open breach.

If the First Speaker really intended to come down from Thunder Mountain to meet Chabano, only a little delay would be needed. The presence of Kwanyi warriors, added to his own new skills, would make Ryku proof against anything untoward that Geyrus might intend for him.

The two men remained in the posture of mediation for so long that Ryku began to suffer from both impatience and stiffening limbs. The First Speaker had kept his promise, giving Ryku most of the knowledge of a full Speaker. What had not been taught, Ryku had contrived to learn on his own, as well as certain arts that not even the Speakers acknowledged.

This had taken its toll of his body, however. He had gone sleepless as often as not, endured thirst, hunger, and both great and little pain, and driven his body to its uttermost limits. Or what he had believed were its uttermost limits, before he began the final steps to the Speakers' arts. Now he knew that he had been hardly more than a youth thinking himself a man.

It seemed that the moon must have turned from full to dark and back again to half-bright before the First Speaker broke the posture. When Ryku saw Geyrus's eyes, he wished it had indeed taken that long, or even longer.

"Ryku, I am not pleased with how little knowledge of the Ichiribu you have gathered from Chabano."

"I have been as zealous in seeking what the Kwanyi know as I have been in studying the Speakers' arts. You have praised my zeal in the second. I ask for no praise in the first matter if my best has been less than you wished, but I swear—"

"Do not use vain oaths in the Cave of the Living Wind," Geyrus said sharply.

That was asking of Ryku what the other Speakers hardly seemed to ask of themselves. Did Geyrus mean to put fear in him by such childish bullying? Or did the First Speaker know something about the Living Wind that he had not told Ryku?

That second thought made the air of the caves seem even more chill

than common. It also made Ryku ransack his memory and knowledge for some art that might let him find the answer to that question. He knew—as surely as he knew he was alive—that Geyrus would not tell him freely, if at all.

"If I can use no oaths, may I use my wits?"

"Your tongue has grown sharp, Ryku."

"I trust that my wits have not grown dull. I would beg the right to come with you when you go to meet Chabano. I believe he may speak more freely to me than to you, if he is given the opportunity to do so without his warriors knowing it."

"They still fear the God-Men?"

"Yes."

"As indeed they ought to," Geyrus said, rising to his feet. As always, he was taller than one expected, seeing his many years and believing they must have shrunk his limbs. "Very well. If Chabano thinks to trade rotten fish for fresh, he must be taught to think more clearly."

Geyrus departed, without bidding Ryku to follow. The Silent Brother returned to the posture of meditation, but with his thoughts very much elsewhere.

Had Chabano found himself knowing less of matters among the Ichiribu than he had expected to do? This seemed not unlikely. Doubtless he had spies in the herdlands and fieldlands, even on the island itself. Just as certainly, those spies might have fallen prey to the Ichiribu, or simply found it difficult to send messages to their master.

It would be as well to learn about this. Geyrus would not forever contain his wrath if he learned he had made a fool's bargain. If Ryku learned the truth before his master did, he could at least flee to the Kwanyi, offering silence in return for protection.

Ryku doubted that Geyrus would challenge Chabano himself over one fugitive, or indeed over anything else. Geyrus was old, and his judgment twisted by the loss of that wretched girl, but he was not yet a fool.

Which meant that Ryku should go to the meeting prepared to use the arts of a full Speaker, so that whichever side he chose to aid would have cause to be grateful to him.

The lamp bowl held mixed tallow and fish oil, with herbs crumbled into it. Valeria thought she had smelled sweeter middens, but Seyganko and

Emwaya seemed to inhale the scent hungrily. Conan was as indifferent to it as he was to every other discomfort, great and small.

Valeria marveled that a man could learn such endurance. But then, Conan had learned in the harsh school of a life where one endured or died. Even when he was a free youth in his native Cimmeria, its stony fields and snowbound winters must have begun the lessons.

"Valeria and I will give the warriors of the Ichiribu any knowledge of our fighting arts that they wish to learn in order to make themselves a better match for the Kwanyi on land," Conan said. "You have also seen how much Valeria knows of the art of fighting from boats."

"We have," Seyganko said. "You used the words 'wish to learn'? Not 'need to learn.' "

"I have a pretty fair and wide experience of war, and much of it in the Black Kingdoms," Conan replied. "I did not win the name Amra by sitting on a golden stool and fondling my concubines."

"No doubt this displeased your concubines," Emwaya said. Valeria understood enough of the Ichiribu tongue now to smile at the young woman. Emwaya sometimes seemed almost young enough to be Valeria's daughter, at other times old enough in wisdom, if not in years, to be her grandmother.

"The Kwanyi are there and I am here," Conan said. "And being here, I'm not one to insult my hosts by saying that they are children in war. Chabano has not made the Kwanyi invincible. But there are war skills that I can teach, those that will save the Ichiribu many warriors when we meet the Kwanyi in battle."

Seyganko nodded. "I am sure of that. Conan, I will proclaim that you speak with my voice in teaching war skills. I ask only one favor in return."

"What is it?"

"Give over this notion of marching through the tunnels, out of the gods' daylight and through who-knows-what evil magic, to strike the Kwanyi."

Emwaya turned and stared at her betrothed. Then she spoke sharply, words that Valeria did not understand but whose meaning she sensed as a woman. Seyganko had surprised Emwaya, and she was even more displeased at the surprise than at the suggestion.

Emwaya went on for some time. It seemed to Valeria that Conan was holding back laughter, that Seyganko much wished to be elsewhere, and that Emwaya would slap her betrothed's head from his shoulders for a Shemite brass piece.

Neither Conan nor Valeria offered Emwaya any coin at all, so Seyganko went unmolested until the woman ran out of breath. Valeria remained uneasy until Emwaya at last collapsed into Seyganko's arms, tears running down her cheeks. Doubtless her anger had wearied her more than it had him; the poison was out of her body, but she had not yet regained her strength.

"Conan," Seyganko said. He took what seemed half the night before he found his next word. "It seems that Emwaya believes, as you do, in the matter of the tunnels."

The Cimmerian continued to feign a temple image. Judging that he had good reasons for this, Valeria sought to do likewise.

"She and I will submit this matter to her father," the warrior chief went on. "Will you abide by his judgment?"

Conan nodded. "I've no wish to insult you, Emwaya, but your father likely enough knows more of this than he has had time to teach you." He looked at Emwaya, and Valeria saw the Ichiribu woman try to meet those icy-blue eyes and not quite succeed.

"I trust we've no need to wait to begin my instructing the warriors?" the Cimmerian concluded.

Seyganko took Conan's meaning—that he might keep all his authority over the Ichiribu warriors to himself if he spoke against Conan again. Valeria shifted sideways so that she was within reach of Conan, and also faced Seyganko.

The Ichiribu warrior, being no fool, could recognize a battle that he had lost before it was joined. "Any oaths you need, I will give, Conan, that you may teach the Ichiribu to walk on their hands and hurl spears with their toes!"

"That might be no bad thing should it make the Kwanyi laugh so hard that other warriors could slit their bellies while they laughed," Conan said. "Come at dawn tomorrow, and tell me all you know of the Kwanyi way of fighting. Then I will be more sure of what the Ichiribu could most wisely learn from me."

"We can begin that tonight—" Seyganko began eagerly, then found Emwaya covering his mouth with two fingers in the ritual gesture for silence. She smiled and laid her other hand on his knee.

"We will begin tomorrow, when we are all rested and fit," Conan said, and the suggestion seemed to act as a command on the visitors.

When the curtain had fallen behind them, he let out his laughter in a

roar that made the hanging billow as if in a gale. "There's a woman who hasn't been well-bedded in a while and who won't have it put off for talk of war!"

"And here is another," Valeria said, slipping an arm through Conan's.

"What, not well-bedded? You insult me, or was it some other woman wrapped around me like a vine last night?"

"You know as well as any man that one night is like one meal. Man or woman, you cannot live on it forever."

He turned to her, and she rose so that he could undo the waistcloth, throwing her arms around him as he did so.

This would not last, she knew. Neither of them could long endure a partnership in which they could not be sure who led and who followed. But for now, she could follow him with pleasure—and not only to the sleeping mat.

Wobeku wondered that the torches did not draw swarms of insects that would sting and bite, whether the pests flew or crawled. It was not the torches themselves, he was sure. They smelled and looked much the same as any others.

The God-Men—the Speakers to the Living Wind, as they called themselves—must have worked magic. Potent magic, too, when one considered how many insects a single torch could draw out of the jungle! That was one difference between the island and the mainland, and Wobeku would have to endure it until Chabano's victory took him home again.

Better gnawed by insects than dead, he told himself, then cast his face into a form suitable for receiving Spirit-Speakers, or whatever the God-Men were. As a fugitive among the Kwanyi, he had barely the right to ask such questions; he would have a long wait for answers.

At least Chabano's wrath had come and gone swiftly, and when it had departed, Wobeku had not lain dead on the floor of the Paramount Chief's hut. That Aondo had been a fool, and that Wobeku had not broken taboo, undoubtedly counted for much. It counted for more that Chabano killed fewer men out of hand these days, even when in one of his famous rages.

Now Wobeku stood among the twelve warriors surrounding Chabano, and all thirteen pairs of eyes were fixed on the torchlit path from whence six men were approaching. The newcomers wore the ceremonial garb of God-Men, with complete cloaks and headdresses of crimson and sapphire

feathers, loin-guards of leather tooled and gilded, wrist braces of silver, and staves that seemed to be worth a good herd of cattle each.

One of the God-Men wore the less ornate garb of a Silent Brother but bore the First Speaker's oxhide shield, with its ornaments of Golden Serpents, eight of them forming a pattern it was best not to look upon for long. If one did, one began to think that the serpents lived, or at least that their eyes glowed green.

The five companions of the approaching First Speaker divided, three placing themselves on one side of their leader and two on the other. The First Speaker himself advanced toward Chabano. He seemed to have no fear of being within reach of so many spears, but then, perhaps his magic gave him good assurance.

What the Living Wind was, not even the Kwanyi wished to ask, lest they receive disquieting answers. That it made the God-Men powerful, all knew so well that there was no need for questions on that matter.

Wobeku followed the lead of Chabano and his companions in clashing his spear against his shield, in the salute of honor to a Paramount Chief. The First Speaker returned the salute by thrusting the butt of his staff deep into the earth—whereupon Wobeku felt as if the ground under his feet had turned for a moment red-hot.

Again Wobeku followed the lead of those around him; none of them so much as flinched. Yet he noticed that Chabano seemed more wary, and the First Speaker was unsmiling; it seemed that the man was displeased, and moreover, ready to make his displeasure felt.

"Hail, Geyrus, First Speaker to the Living Wind!" Chabano said, laying his spear and shield on the ground. For a moment, Wobeku thought the chief would prostrate himself, but he did not even kneel.

He rose to his full height and crossed his arms on his chest.

"Hail, Chabano," Geyrus said in a chill voice barely above a whisper.

"First Speaker," Chabano said sharply, "you have summoned me. I have come. You, it seems, are here in anger. What cause is there for this anger?"

"You have lied to me," Geyrus said.

Wobeku was not the only man to suck in his breath. Any common man calling Chabano a liar to his face would have thrown his life away. He would be fortunate to die on the spot, instead of suffering impalement or worse.

"If so, I have done so with good cause," Chabano snapped.

That seemed an equally grave insult to Geyrus. Staves rose, and the faces under the headdresses looked more like demon-lodge masks than Wobeku found pleasant. He had sometimes wondered which would have the victory in a contest of swiftly thrown spears and swiftly cast spells. He had not expected to learn the answer by being part of such a battle himself.

Geyrus seemed to struggle with the urge not to strike Chabano dead on the spot, and mastered it. His tone was still harsh when he replied.

"Oh. Am I worthy of the knowledge of what cause you claim for lying to the Speakers to the Living Wind?"

"Yes. There are those in your caves on Thunder Mountain whose eyes and ears serve our enemies. It is best we find ways of speaking the truth to each other without their hearing it."

To Wobeku, that made perfect sense. To Geyrus, however, it seemed to be an insult almost past bearing. Wobeku gripped his spear until his knuckles grew pale in fear of what he saw on the First Speaker's face.

Yet nothing passed the man's lips. At least not until the rage left his countenance. His shoulders sagged then, and he seemed to age ten years before Wobeku's eyes.

"Do you trust your own folk?" he asked, as one might ask the price of a goat.

"Yes," Chabano replied. One could almost see his chest swell with pride at the loyalty of the Kwanyi.

"Then let us go to your nearest village, and there we will see to this speaking of the truth. If there have been lies told—"

"Silence!" Chabano roared. Geyrus did not take offense; he seemed to realize, as did Wobeku, that the order was not aimed at him. It was aimed at the warriors around Chabano. Several of them were from that "nearest village," and their faces said plainly that they did not care to host God-Men.

Chabano's power, it seemed, was not without limits.

"Great Chief—" one warrior began.

Chabano turned and struck the man across the face with an open hand. Then he snatched the man's spear from his grip, broke it across his knee, and pointed at the ground. The man flung his shield on the jungle floor and prostrated himself on it.

Chabano did not lift a weapon. Instead, he brought one heavy foot down hard on the man's back, several times. Each time the breath *huffed* out of the man, and Wobeku saw him biting his lip until it bled.

"Be grateful for my mercy," Chabano said. "You will carry a spear again for the war, but avoid my sight until then."

The warrior rose, unaided, for his comrades drew back from him as if he carried pox on his skin. Bent and stumbling like one sick or aged, he lurched down the path and out of sight.

Wobeku did not watch him go. His instincts told him that this clash was not yet done, and that the heart of the matter was still Geyrus's will. He did not dare watch the First Speaker too closely, but he tried to follow the man's eyes from one warrior to another. If Geyrus raised his staff, or if his eyes lingered on one man longer than on the others...

Neither staff nor eyes gave Wobeku a clue. But he was fortunate nonetheless. He was well out to the left of Chabano and so could see the men behind the chief without appearing to look at them. There were three of them, and now one of them was breathing with unnatural slowness. His eyes seemed to have turned crimson and sapphire. His spear was rising into throwing position, as if drawing his arms with it.

Then suddenly the spear leaped up. The warrior leaped with it—or rather, his death-grip on the weapon drew him with it until his feet no longer touched the ground.

Those who saw the spectacle were mute from surprise, or perhaps from magic. All except Wobeku.

"Chief! Behind you!" he screamed. The warning did its work. Chabano whirled, flinging up his shield and thrusting with his spear.

The chief's spear only stabbed air. Wobeku, with more time to aim, struck home. His spear sank into the warrior's side, halfway up his rib cage. The man reeled, turned halfway toward Wobeku, and seemed about to laugh at the sight of the Ichiribu warrior cringing away.

Wobeku could not help it. The other's eyes were now pools of crimson-and-sapphire fire, and a faint mist in the same hues seemed to cling to both his weapon and his hands. Then the crimson of the God-Men's magic gave way to the crimson of blood, pouring from the man's side and mouth. He choked, reeled again, and fell with the spear still protruding from his side.

Wobeku knew that the man would shortly have company in death: Chabano and all his companions. Nor would Chabano seek to escape that

fate by fleeing. It would be futile. Geyrus would have his life, no matter where he fled.

Wobeko himself also had fled once before. It was not in him to do so again, any more than he could have slain the *bidui* boys.

He was so concerned with meeting a warrior's death that he did not see Chabano step forward, perhaps with the same thought in his mind. The chief had his spear raised, and the muscles of his right arm tautened as he made ready to hurl it into Geyrus's throat.

Wobeku saw the First Speaker raise his staff in both hands, holding it out in front of him. He saw Chabano's spear stop as if it had encountered the rock of a mountain. He saw the iron point begin to smoke—and a chill hand seemed to grip his heart and bowels as he saw that the smoke was crimson and blue.

Then he saw the Silent Brother stride up, swing his staff high in both hands like a woman swinging a mortar, and bring it down across the First Speaker's staff.

Wobeku knew in the next moment that death had come for him. Flames shot up from the First Speaker's staff. They also rose from the Speaker himself, as if his body were a pile of straw. They were of all colors and no colors, without smoke but not without heat.

The leaves above the First Speaker turned brown and would have burned had they not been sodden with rain. Common, lawful smoke rose from the jungle floor where the heat seared the mat of dead leaves and vines. Somehow the color of the smoke consoled Wobeku for his coming death. He would not die in a place abandoned by the gods.

Then a moment came when he began to think that he might not die after all. Chabano staggered back, dropping his spear with its half-melted point but seeming otherwise unharmed. He stumbled over Wobeku's victim and nearly fell, but two of his warriors caught him.

Three others, Wobeku among them, saw that the flames enveloped the two staves and the First Speaker, but not the Silent Brother. They also saw that this did not please the other Speakers. Indeed, they were staring with their pale eyes at the spectacle as if it went against all they had been taught was possible.

It very likely was. Wobeku snatched a spear from a warrior too gape-jawed and wide-eyed to tell one end of it from another, raised the weapon, and threw it.

This time he took his victim, the Speaker just to the right of Geyrus, in

the throat. The man dropped his staff, went to his knees, clawed at his torn throat and the spear in it, then bent so far forward that his headdress fell off. As it struck the jungle floor, so did he, toppling onto his side and kicking out what remained of his life.

Wobeku's swiftness seemed to restore life to the other warriors—that, and a few sharp words from Chabano in the tone that meant disobedience could yield death. In moments, the remaining Speakers were surrounded by warriors holding spear-points at their throats or stomachs. The warriors kept them motionless until the First Speaker was only ashes on the jungle floor.

The Silent Brother gathered the staves from the surviving Speakers' unresisting hands, then spoke to them in a tongue Wobeku did not understand. He only sensed in the voice age beyond anything he had dreamed of. It held echoes of times before Atlantis, of times even before the gods had judged that men, not beasts, should rule the earth.

This done, the Silent Brother turned and knelt to Chabano. It seemed to Wobeku that he would have prostrated himself had that not meant setting down his armful of staves or turning his eyes from the Speakers. The Ichiribu renegade also noticed for the first time that the Silent Brother's eyes had the pallid hue of a full Speaker's.

Chabano looked from Wobeku to the Silent Brother and nodded. Respect for a chief was all very well, yet keeping those Speakers bound by fear, never mind of what, was more needed now.

"I am Ryku," the Silent Brother said. Understanding came to Wobeku. Such a name had come to his ears without his knowing what it meant. So had tales of Chabano's spy on Thunder Mountain, although these were whispered. Ryku and the spy, it seemed, were one and the same.

"Hail, Ryku, friend to the Kwanyi," Wobeku said. It seemed the least foolish thing he could say.

"You are not of the Kwanyi," Ryku said. "Are you the eyes and ears of Chabano among the Ichiribu?"

"Before I answer that question," Chabano said with dangerous mildness, "you must answer one."

"Ask, my chief."

Chabano seemed to take the words at their value and to ignore Ryku's tone. "What did you say to your comrades?"

"I told them that if they did not swear obedience to me in all matters concerning aid to the Kwanyi, I would allow your warriors to slay them

here and now."

"And did they swear?" Chabano waved a hand, and warriors' hands tightened on spear-shafts.

Whatever the Speakers swore, they swore it fervently and at length. Before the oath was half over, Ryku bade the Kwanyi warriors to lower their spears. When it was done, he spoke a sharp word and the Speakers scurried off up the trail as fast as their aged legs could carry them.

Chabano looked eloquently at his warriors, and they retreated with similar speed in the opposite direction. The chief, the God-Man, and the spy were alone in the jungle.

"My thanks to both of you," Chabano said. "A chief's thanks is worth much, and it will be worth more the longer I rule." He cast a sharp look at Wobeku. "Although had you been as swift some time ago as you were today, you would not be here."

Ryku asked that this be explained; Chabano acceded to the request with a mildness that amazed the fugitive warrior. But then, even a Paramount Chief did not stand upon rank with a God-Man who seemed to have made himself a full Speaker upon his own whim.

Or was it that becoming a God-Man was easier than the tribes had been led to believe? That would have been a cheering thought, had Wobeku wished to follow in Ryku's footsteps.

As his ambition was to be high among the Kwanyi when they ruled all this land, he was not so cheered. Fumble-fingered God-Men would not be of much use to the Kwanyi in the face of Dobanpu's Spirit-Speaking. Dobanpu's mastery was no tale, and the vengeance he would wreak on Wobeku would be no light one!

TWELVE

The Ichiribu and the Kwanyi took time to gird themselves for battle. This did not entirely arise because of each of their new allies, although those played a part.

Wobeku found that while the warriors kept their distance, few doubted him. He had, after all, saved Chabano, the Paramount Chief whom all had followed for twelve years. Even those who followed Chabano out of fear more than from love knew that the Kwanyi would be doomed without him. The man who saved him had placed the tribe greatly in his debt.

Ryku was also regarded with some gratitude, but likewise with more than a little fear. He also had saved Chabano, and moreover, had cast down the greatest of the God-Men. In so doing, however, he had made himself a yet greater God-Man.

It was as well for Ryku that he did not go among the warriors more often than when Chabano summoned him. He remained, nine days out of ten, in seclusion on Thunder Mountain, putting the Speakers, the Silent Brothers, and the servants and slaves in as much order as his powers and the time allowed. Had he come to the villages too often, someone might have served him as Wobeku had served one of the Speakers—which would have saved the Kwanyi a deal of trouble in days to come, but they were only a tribe of stout fighters, not seers who could foretell the future.

Conan had a busy time among the Ichiribu, for all that most of them thought him favored by the gods, if not in truth sent by them.

The Kwanyi had been invincible on land since Chabano had taught them the art of fighting in a line, with the tall shield and the great spear that a man could thrust as well as throw. It was not to be expected that the Ichiribu could learn that art, even from the Cimmerian, well enough and soon enough to face their foes in full array.

So Conan set about teaching them how to use their old weapons in new ways. They had a fair number of archers and slingers, who could gall and torment the flanks of the Kwanyi ranks. Their fishing tridents were not despicable weapons against the Kwanyi spear, either, if they could contrive to fight two warriors against one.

Valeria also taught them how to fight from their canoes with more skill than before. What she did not know about the handling of small boats, it was probably not given to men—or women—to know. Even the most seasoned fishermen of the Ichiribu soon said loudly that Conan's shield-woman and vowed lover was worth almost as much as the Cimmerian himself.

"We must be the ants, and the Kwanyi the warthog," Conan said, until even Seyganko wearied of hearing it for all that he knew it was true. "They are a bigger warthog than we can be. Fight them tusk to tusk, and we are doomed. Sting them a thousand times, and the doom will be theirs."

The skill the Ichiribu showed in learning what he taught left Conan in good heart. He would have been still more confident had the matter of marching through the tunnels not remained dangling in the wind.

Dobanpu agreed that if the spirits allowed, this would be a cunning and deadly trick, that of making warriors sprout from the ground. He would not say more, other than that he waited for a sign from the spirits.

He continued to demur, and Conan's temper grew short. "Is it the spirits who've turned mute?" he asked Emwaya one morning. "Or is it your father?"

"If I knew the answer to that, it would still not help us," the girl replied. "No man can force the spirits, and my father is almost as difficult to make speak when he chooses to be silent."

"If he chooses to be silent for too long, he may be choosing the end of his folk," Valeria snapped. Both the visitors could see that Emwaya herself was uneasy at her father's reluctance to speak. Neither doubted that she told the truth.

"He knows this also," Emwaya said, and withdrew with as much dignity as she could contrive,

"Wizards!" Conan said. He made the word sound like a particularly foul obscenity. Then he looked at the sky. The sun shone, although through a haze that promised rain for later in the day.

The rainy season drew closer with each sunrise, and Conan was of a mind to leave the tribes of the Lake of Death to their own devices if Dobanpu did not speak before the downpour began in earnest. The rivers would run high then, and the rain would make pursuit difficult.

"If you have no work before noon, let us take a canoe and go fishing," Valeria suggested. "One of the large ones, I think."

Conan laughed. The large canoes, they had discovered, were something of a burden for two paddlers. But they were also broad of beam. With a sleeping mat or two laid in the bottom, they made a good place for hot loving.

They paddled closer to the Kwanyi-held shore than usual on a fishing expedition. This was not Conan's notion, still less Valeria's. It had come from Emwaya, who had appeared at the shore as they were loading the fishing gear and mats into the canoe.

"May I come with you?" she had asked.

Conan and Valeria had frowned. They would have more gladly been alone, but neither wished to offend Dobanpu's daughter and Seyganko's betrothed. Also, Conan, at least, had heard in Emwaya's voice a hint of

something more than wishing to amuse herself on a tedious day.

"Be welcome," Valeria had said, and had sent a *bidui* boy for an extra mat and water gourd.

Emwaya proved herself a strong if not an overly skilled paddler, and the canoe made good time to the usual fishing spot. As Conan and Valeria slackened their stroke, Emwaya pointed toward the Kwanyi shore.

"Can we go closer?"

This time, Conan did more than frown. "The Kwanyi are not complete landlubbers. If they see suspicious-looking folk bobbing about off their shore, they may find a canoe or two to fill with warriors."

"I will lie down, so that none may recognize me."

"What about us?" Valeria asked. "Or have Conan and I turned your hue from the sun without anyone's telling us?"

Emwaya might know potent magic herself, and to offend her was to offend a master of still more potent spells. But neither she nor her father seemed quite as wise in matters of war as Conan could wish.

They bargained, as Valeria said afterward, like a captain and a ship's chandler haggling over the price of a galley's fittings. In the end, they had drunk half the water to ease throats dry from talking, and agreed on where to go. It was nearer the shore than Conan liked, farther than Emwaya wanted, but would serve the purposes of both.

Above all, they could not readily be caught against the shore by canoes coming in from the lake. Canoes coming out from the land they could see in time to keep their lead, and having a third paddler would help.

"Remember, too, that I can summon aid from the island if we seem to be pursued too closely," Emwaya said. She said no more, and Conan did not ask further. He was still none too easy over having such as Dobanpu as a friend. Sorcerers, he had to admit, might remain friendly, or at least harmless—but he could count the ones who had done so on the fingers of one hand. Those who had sooner or later been deadly foes, on the other hand—all the fingers and toes in the canoe could hardly number *them*.

They reached their intended spot. Conan, having the sharpest eyes of the three, studied the shore. It showed no sign of human presence and precious little sign of any other animal life. Only a spit of sand with furrows where crocodiles had basked hinted that these placid waters might hold peril.

Conan and Valeria threw over their lines and readied their tridents.

Emwaya lay down on her mat in the bow and appeared to fall asleep. To Conan, her breathing seemed less regular than sleep commonly yielded. The way her hands spread palm-down, fingers opened, against the hull of the canoe also hinted of an unrestful mood.

To the Cimmerian, she seemed to be listening for something. What, he did not know. Remembering that the tunnels might well honeycomb the bottom of the lake, holding the-gods-knew-what ancient evil, he chose not to try to guess.

The sun climbed to its peak, then began sinking. No fish had taken the bait. Indeed, Conan had seen no sign that anything at all lived in this part of the lake. That was not an agreeable thought, but one he kept to himself. Valeria, easier in her mind, had actually gone to sleep.

Suddenly Emwaya sat up, brushing tangled hair out of her eyes, one hand gripping the side of the canoe. She looked wildly about her, then seemed to discover something off to port. Conan looked where she did, but saw nothing save the lake's surface, unrippled by even a breath of wind or a leaping fish. He was still staring when Emwaya sprang up, threw off her waistcloth, and plunged over the side of the canoe.

Conan's roar would have stunned any fish within a good distance. It woke Valeria. Instantly alert, she took in the danger at a glance. She clutched the anchor stone, wriggled clear of the coiled line, then flung the stone overboard. "Two will be better at finding her than one, Conan. The canoe can fend for itself."

The anchor line hissed as it ran out, but when it reached its end, the canoe still drifted freely. Conan looked into the lake, sensing a depth there he had never before encountered. A depth into which Dobanpu's daughter had plunged, and into which Conan and Valeria had to follow her if they were to—

Emwaya's head broke the surface. In a few strokes she was alongside, pulling herself half out of the water. Drops sparkled in her hair, sleeked down from the dousing, and glowed on her shoulders and breasts. Her countenance took away any thoughts of her beauty, however.

"Come and see for yourselves," she said. "Be warned. You will not like what you find."

"My life's been full of unpleasing sights and it's not over yet," Conan said. He swung his legs over the side of the canoe, slipped into the water, then held the craft steady while Valeria dove over the side.

"Stay close to me," Emwaya ordered when Valeria surfaced. "It is my

intent to protect you from what lies down there."

Conan could not help but feel that he would rather be sure of more than her intent. But Emwaya had at least this virtue, rare in magic-wielders: she would not promise miracles.

Conan filled his lungs and plunged under the surface, Emwaya behind him and Valeria in the rear. They were a canoe's length below when Conan saw what Emwaya meant.

It was as if they were suddenly swimming through a vast globe of liquid crystal. The water was utterly transparent, utterly without color, all the way to the bottom of the lake.

That bottom, Conan judged, had to be twice the height of a ship's mainmast below them. No wonder the anchor had not found purchase. Indeed, he could see the anchor stone dangling uselessly from its line, well clear of the bottom.

In that transparent void, nothing moved. Nothing lived, either—not the smallest fish, not even a scrap of the weeds that choked some portions of the lake. Conan looked down at the bottom.

It, too, was bare of life. But it was not featureless. Across the Cimmerian's field of vision ran what looked like a deep trench. Into that trench had tumbled blocks of stone that showed the unmistakable signs of human shaping. Even from high above, Conan saw that much. He also thought that he saw carved on some of the stones the writhing serpent-shape he had seen rather too often in the tunnels.

That was as much as he could fathom before a burning in his lungs told him that it was time to seek air. He kicked toward the surface, and Emwaya and Valeria followed.

When Conan broke into the sunlight, Valeria was there before he had finished taking his first deep breath. Emwaya was nowhere to be seen, and as Conan filled his lungs, he began to think of diving back down to find her.

"Valeria, if Emwaya's in trouble—"

"She'll need us both even more now. And remember, I owe her my life."

"True enough. I was thinking more of the need for *one* of us to reach the island and tell of what happened."

Valeria looked less out of temper and seemed about to climb into the canoe when Emwaya broke the surface. Her arms flailed about wildly, and her breathing was a desperate rasp. Conan and Valeria each gripped an

arm and upheld her with her head clear of the water.

The panic left her eyes as breath filled her lungs again. She lay back in the water, trusting her friends, and her gasping turned to steady breathing. At last she slipped out of their grasp and climbed into the canoe.

"What is it, Emwaya?" Conan asked.

"My father would know—would say it—better. But... under the lake bottom is one of those tunnels."

"That's the trench that collapsed?"

"Yes. But—in the tunnel—somewhere beyond where it collapsed, there is something."

"A flooded tunnel, I'd wager."

The jest seemed to frighten Emwaya. "Do not speak lightly of such matters, Conan. I—it seems to me that what is there lives."

"How can that be?" Valeria asked. She had finally caught the sense of the conversation. "Everything else in the water for a good thousand paces seems to be dead. Worse, driven away."

"Yes. What is in the tunnel—it lives by eating the— the word is taboo, but will you understand 'life-force'?"

"The life-force of everything that comes close to it?" Valeria had her hand on her dagger as she spoke.

"Such—beings—have lived. We, my father and I, thought they were all dead."

"It seems that at least one isn't," Conan said briskly. He picked up a paddle. "My thought is, let's return to the island and tell your father, if he hasn't already smelled it out for himself."

"I should dive again, to learn more of what it might be," Emwaya said.

Valeria hugged the Ichiribu woman. "You barely reached the surface after your second dive. Go down for the third time and it won't take any ancient magical monster to eat your life-force. You'll drown, and *we* will be left to explain to your father and Seyganko. I'd rather fight the monster, myself."

Valeria's words were clumsy and her accent harsh, but Emwaya understood the sense of them, and the goodwill in Valeria's embrace. "Then so be it," the young woman said. "Let us be off, before it senses us."

It was not the largest of the Golden Serpents, but it was the last and the oldest. It and one other had outlived all the rest of their kind, for the magic in the burrows they had found beneath the lake had changed them.

They had once eaten flesh. Now they ate the life-force that animated flesh, even including water-plants. They could draw it from a creature beyond the sight of their jeweled green eyes, and with it, feed their own strength.

Then it came about that the other ancient serpent grew weary, and its own life-force began to ebb. The last of the Golden Serpents had no sense of mercy, or of any human notion. It knew only that if the other was allowed to die, its life-force would not feed the one who survived.

So the Golden Serpents fought, and the last one killed its comrade. The life-force entered it, and it found new strength. But the battle had made great disorder in the magic that bound the tunnels, holding them up and lighting them. A long stretch of tunnel collapsed. Yet the magic held strongly enough that water did not pour in and drown the last of the Golden Serpents.

But the tunnel was fallen, and to find a way back through it would mean digging through much rock. The Golden Serpent was not a keen-witted creature, but it knew that neither its strength nor its teeth would be equal to that task. So it rested, drew life-force from the creatures of the waters above, and from time to time sought a way around the fallen stones.

It found one site that seemed likely to be easily made large enough for passage. But there was no trace of anything living, of anything that would repay the effort to open the way.

At least not at first. Then a time came when the Golden Serpent sensed life-force again in the tunnel—strong life, too, like that of the two-legged creatures who had cast the ancient spells on these tunnels. It was so faint that the creatures must be far away.

But if life had come once more into the depths, it would not leave. The Golden Serpent worked at the barrier so that it would be easily breached when there was prey worth having on the other side. They would walk up to the barrier and then there would be no escape. There would, however, be new strength for the Golden Serpent. Strength, perhaps, to let it leave this hiding place and be abroad in the world again, where life-force could be had everywhere.

Even those days might come again when the two-legs *brought* living creatures to the Golden Serpent, that it might feed on flesh. To have *both* the living flesh and the life-force from it— If one could use the word

"ambition" of a creature without human wits, one might say that this wily scheme was the Golden Serpent's greatest ambition.

As he hauled the canoe onto the shore, Conan noticed that there were fewer people about than usual. He found nothing amiss in that, until he saw that the same was true all along the path leading up to the village.

When he saw what seemed half of the tribe around the hole where the hearthstone had been, he knew that something was wrong. Emwaya had been sweating and tight-lipped all the way up from the shore, but Conan had taken this as weariness after her strenuous swimming. Now he suspected worse.

He knew worse when he saw women and children loading stones and earth into baskets, and *fanda* warriors carrying the loaded baskets to the edge of the village. To ask a *fanda* warrior on duty to perform women's work could mean a death-duel, or at least a harsh judgment from the council of the tribe. Yet here was everyone old enough or young enough to stand on their feet unaided, digging out the shaft which led to the tunnels.

"I think Dobanpu has spoken," Valeria said, almost whispering.

"Likely enough," Conan agreed. "Are *you* game for another little ramble in the depths?"

"To go hunting Emwaya's life-force eater?" She looked both weary and disgusted with herself. "Ah, well. I have heard they have a proverb in Khitai: 'Be careful what you wish for. The gods may grant it.' It seems we wished a trifle too hard for the opening of the tunnels."

"It's done past undoing," Conan said. He unbuckled his belt and handed it and his weapons to Valeria. "Take these to the hut. I've some knowledge of this kind of work that the Ichiribu may find handy."

THIRTEEN

The last of the fifty warriors vanished into the jungle just as dawn touched the hills to the east. Wobeku looked after them, his face set. He doubted that he would deceive Chabano, and indeed, he did not.

"So fearful of the lives of men not of your tribe?" the chief asked. The note of mockery was plain. So was his real intent.

"The Kwanyi are my tribe now," Wobeku said. "Does its chief doubt oaths sworn to him in the presence of Ryku the First Speaker?"

"No."

There was nothing else that Chabano could say. He might doubt Ryku, as Wobeku certainly did. To put these doubts into words that others might hear was not a chief's wisdom.

"I trust the men you are sending against the herdlands and grainlands of the Ichiribu," Wobeku said. "They will do the work of far more than their numbers in confusing the enemy. They can neither lose those lands without starving, nor defend them without so many of them at hand that they can defend nothing else. No, what grieves me is that I cannot go with them."

"You are needed here, Wobeku." Left unsaid was that Wobeku was not yet so trusted by the Kwanyi warriors that he would be safe out of the chief's sight.

"I was a *bidui* boy for years, in the herdlands," Wobeku insisted. "Then I was of the *fanda* that guarded the grainlands. I know every hut, every valley, every spring in those lands. If I went, even as a simple guide, the men you have sent will do better work. More of them will also live to boast of it to their women."

"Wobeku, when we have won, there will not be enough women to hear all the boasting we shall do. Nor will there be enough beer to keep our throats wet for it."

Wobeku knelt, rose when dismissed, and turned away. Not until he was out of the chief's sight did he dare make even the smallest gesture of aversion.

Chabano might tempt the gods. That was a chief's right. Wobeku was no chief, and much doubted that he ever would be, even if Chabano came to rule all the lands to the Salt Water. He had dreamed of such things when he had agreed to serve Chabano, but those were the dreams of a younger man.

Now he had seen more years, and more truths about the world. Wobeku would be quite content to end his life with sons to sing the death-song for him, women to wash his body, and cattle and fields enough to provide a feast for his friends when the smoke of his burning had risen to the gods.

He thought he would ask for the woman Mokossa as his first prize of the victory. She seemed not only a pleasure to the eye, but intelligent and healthy, a breeder of worthy sons.

Conan was inspecting the warriors of the tunnel band when a *bidui* boy

came to summon him to Seyganko. From the boy's face, it was urgent that the Cimmerian lose not a moment.

He motioned to Valeria, and she laid her pouches on her shield and ran over. Even after a night spent with little sleep, Conan took pleasure in her lithe grace and sure movements. He took even more pleasure in the knowledge that she would be at his back when they plunged into the magic-haunted passages beneath the lake once again.

"Valeria, can you finish my work here? Will you see that all the men have what they were ordered to bring and are sober, not astray in their wits and the like?"

"I think that only a drunkard or a madman would have offered himself to this quest," she said with a wry smile.

"Or men who think Dobanpu speaks the truth," Conan said.

"I am surprised to find you among them," Valeria whispered.

Conan shrugged. "Call me one who has not caught Dobanpu or his daughter in a lie as yet. That puts them leagues ahead of most of the sorcerers I've met." He patted her shoulder. "Just pretend to know what you are doing—"

"The way you do on the mats?"

"Woman, was it my pretending that made you howl like a she-wolf last night? Half the village heard you, or so I've been told."

Valeria made a sound that was half curse, half laugh, and turned away. Conan saw her bare shoulders quivering as silent laughter took her. Then he hurried off to Seyganko.

He found the war leader on hands and knees beside an upturned canoe, studying the bottom as though the secrets of the gods, or at least of victory over the Kwanyi might be found there.

Seyganko seemed drawn with doubt as he led Conan aside. Part of it had to be the burden of leading so many men into a war that neither they nor their tribe might survive. Conan was not vastly older than Seyganko, but he had borne that burden more often than the other, and knew that it grew no lighter with the years.

The other part of Seyganko's unease came out swiftly. "We have seen Kwanyi warriors in the forest on the edge of the herdlands and grainlands. Goats have been found slain, and at least one herdsman has vanished."

Conan nodded. This was a matter of the higher art of war, of which he knew more than he cared to admit, less than he wished. What he both

knew and could admit to, however—

"Never fight a war believing that the enemy will wait for you to descend on him like a chamber pot from a high window. Chabano seeks to draw warriors away from the attack on him."

"He will do so if we are not to leave our herds and fields defenseless."

"Herds can walk, can they not?"

"Yes, but—"

"Send enough warriors to protect the herdsmen while they drive the herds and flocks south into the hills by the river. Then the Kwanyi will have to make a two-day march across open ground to come at them. You have archers, and they do not. How many of the Kwanyi do you think will reach the hills alive?"

"Ah." Seyganko's smile was brief. "But the fields are not yet harvested. If they are burned—"

"And are the burners to be allowed to do their work without having their throats slit by night?" Conan asked, acting more patient than he felt. He hoped that the burden of leadership had not fuddled Seyganko's wits.

"That also can be done," Seyganko said. This time, his smile lasted. "Some of the grain, indeed, we can harvest and carry off to feed the herds and flocks. We shall eat it in one form or another, and perhaps also the herds and flocks of the Kwanyi."

Conan clapped Seyganko on both shoulders, and the two men exchanged vows to guard each other's women if one of them did not survive the war. Then Conan returned to the shaft more swiftly than he had gone, and just in time to see Emwaya fall in line with the warriors about the hole.

Conan rolled his eyes up to the sky, muttered something that might have been "Women!" and frowned at Valeria. She shrugged and made a gesture eloquent of the futility of arguing with either her or Emwaya.

"Very well," Conan growled. He turned to face the troop, forty stout warriors and Emwaya.

"I'll go down first. Anything that will support my weight or let me pass will be enough for any of you. Aondo was the only one among you bigger than I, and he's now food for the crocodiles."

"I never thought I'd feel sorry for a crocodile," a warrior called, "but the creature's doubtless died by now."

The men's laughter was good to hear. "No one else start down until I

call and the ladders and ropes are in place," Conan added. "If I catch anyone using the bracing timbers for a ladder, I'll pluck him off them myself and throw him down. Then anyone who slips will have a soft cushion on which to land!"

The men were still laughing as Conan knotted the rope about his waist and began his climb down into the darkness.

It had come again, the presence that meant both flesh and life-force for the Golden Serpent. It was, as far as the serpent could judge, in the same place as before. But it seemed stronger, as if the creature were larger.

Or could there be more of the two-legs? Were they coming down from above to offer themselves to the hunger of the Golden Serpent? Or could they perhaps be coming down to hunt the Golden Serpent itself?

The serpent did not have a mind that could hold thoughts shaped into such words. But it knew the difference between prey and enemies.

It also knew that when the time came for it to strike, even those who came to hunt would find themselves the hunted. This had been so for as long as it could remember—and those memories went back to before it lived in these burrows far below the earth.

One of the warriors, with instincts sharpened in the jungle, hunting and fighting, began gathering up the fallen clods of earth. Conan held up a hand to stop him.

"Leave be, friend. There are no Kwanyi down here to track us by what we leave behind. If anything lives down here, it will have other ways of finding us. Save your strength to see that we find *it* first."

The magic light still illuminated the tunnels. It seemed dimmer, though. Or was that merely because the light below the stairs had died along with their guardian spells? Farther along the tunnel, the glow seemed as bright and unnatural as ever.

Conan and Valeria were the only ones of the band who looked to be at ease. The Cimmerian saw hands clenched on spears, or fingering amulets, or even held behind backs to make gestures of aversion in the hope that the Blue-Eyed Chief; as they called him, would not see.

Conan coughed dirt and dust from his throat and stood before the men. "I won't say there's nothing to be afraid of. That's calling you fools, which you are not. What you are is stout warriors of the Ichiribu, a folk who are

among the best fighters I've ever seen."

That would not pass any spell of truth-sensing, but nobody down here except Emwaya was fit to cast one, and she would hold her peace.

"Watch where you put your feet. Hold your tongue and send messages with your hands. Drink lightly of your water, and eat sparingly. Do not wander off, even if you think you see a whole kingdom down that side tunnel.

"Remember above all that surprising the enemy doubles your strength. We'll be surprising the Kwanyi by coming from a place they don't even know exists. Imagine what *that* will do for our strength!"

The warriors imagined it, and the thought seemed pleasant. They were still looking above and to their rear as they formed their line of march, but they were also smiling. All except Emwaya.

The Golden Serpent set its teeth into the first of the stones in its path and began dragging it to one side. It sought to do this quietly, knowing that most of the prey beneath the earth were keen of hearing.

Except for the two-legs, of course. Its memories of those were not as sharp as of beasts who had shared the burrows with it more recently. It did remember that the two-legs were nearly blind without light, and almost deaf under any circumstance.

If the flesh and life-force it sensed belonged to two-legs, it could work swiftly. The stones could be moved about until, at the right moment, the serpent could strike even more swiftly. Again, the thoughts of the Golden Serpent did not take those exact words, but one such as Emwaya would have interpreted them so.

One such as Emwaya would also have discerned that the work of the Golden Serpent was agitating the spells in the tunnels beneath the lake. The agitation spread out like ripples around a thrown stone, to reach far along the tunnels in all directions, even to the shores of the Lake of Death.

Chabano was entangled with one of his slave women when the messenger entered. He intended to finish with the woman; then he saw the messenger's face. The man was a proven warrior, a leopard-tooth wearer, and what could give him such a countenance could not be a light matter.

He slapped the woman on the rump. "Go, and swiftly."

The woman looked stricken, perhaps with disappointment, and certainly with fear. Displeasing Chabano had meant death to slave women, even in the past year.

"Go!" he shouted and raised a hand for a less gentle slap. "It is not your fault that the gods have sent bad news!"

The woman could not depart swiftly enough. Even her necklace of beads and her waistcloth remained behind. Chabano sat up and glowered at the warrior. As befitted one of his rank, the man did not flinch.

"The earth has cracked in two places along the shore."

"I felt no earth-trembling."

"Nor did anyone else, my chief. I have sent for your principal warriors—"

"Wobeku?"

"No."

"Send for him *at once!*" The man turned to flee, now at last frightened. "Wait!" Chabano commanded. "How wide are the cracks?"

"One might be natural. It is no deeper than a man's height and no wider than a boy's arm. The other is wide enough to swallow an ox, and no one can see the bottom. Yet..."

The man licked his lips. Chabano felt the urge to strike him but knew that would only make him more fearful.

"If they cannot see the bottom, what can they see?"

"Worked stone, perhaps—perhaps *stairs.*"

"*Stairs,*" echoed Chabano. He stood and girded on his loinguard, then pointed to his headdress. The warrior handed it to him, likewise spear and war club.

Accoutering himself gave Chabano time to think. There were legends of cities beneath the lake, or even below the jungle... and there was Dobanpu's power, no legend. Yet if the legends held a grain of truth, the magic of those old cities had made Dobanpu's magic seem that of a child.

This was not the Spirit-Speaker's work, likely enough. But it smelled of magic, and in matters of magic—

"Go and summon Wobeku to the council. Then you yourself go to Thunder Mountain and bear the news to Ryku. Take warriors you trust when you go to the mountain, so that if Ryku wishes to come among us, he will have proper guarding."

And so that any treachery he may be devising can be seen at once.

The messenger thumped his head five times on the floor, then ran as if all his kin would be impaled if he slowed.

Alone, Chabano took down his finest shield, the one with strips of gold and ivory woven into the ox hide. It soothed him to feel the richness under his hands, and his thoughts now came swiftly and clearly.

Gods or men might have opened these cracks. Both fissures would bear watching, and he would set warriors to that task. Meanwhile, the greater part of his warriors, as well as Ryku, would draw back to the slopes of the mountain. Then when the enemy showed himself, it would be time to strike—with Ryku's command of the Living Wind, or with the spears of the warriors, as might seem best.

A battle was certain, and in Kwanyi lands, which Chabano had hoped to avoid. But there was this to ease his mind: the lion bites more easily one who thrusts his head into the lion's jaws.

FOURTEEN

Beyond where the light began again, the tunnel broadened so much that Conan's band could trot four or five abreast. A spear held upright would hardly touch the ceiling, and the floor was of the familiar sullen, grayish rock, without beauty but as smooth as marble.

Conan cared for none of this. Such spaciousness hinted that they were coming to the heart of whatever lay beneath the Lake of Death. That also had to be the heart of whatever magic had for centuries kept the earth from taking back this underground maze.

The Cimmerian dropped back to speak to Emwaya, who was keeping up with the warriors, for all that she seemed to be sleepwalking for long stretches. She was so when Conan fell in beside her. He matched his stride to hers and left her in peace; no good ever came of disturbing even the most benign sorcerer at work.

After time enough to consume a small joint of mutton, Emwaya shook herself like a wet dog and looked at Conan with waking eyes. Then she nodded her head.

"It lives, and it is ahead of us. I think it has grown stronger than it was."

No need to ask what "it" was, or if it was dangerous. The life-force eater was about the only living thing that Emwaya would be sensing, and likely enough the thing most to be feared. But to forty warriors, a Golden

Serpent—or one of those beasts that were kin to both dragon and rhinoceros—would be only healthy exercise.

Conan hurried back to the head of the line. Seeing him hasten thus, some of the warriors quickened their pace. He drew his sword and held it at arm's length across the front rank of Ichiribu.

"Pass that and you may get the flat of it across your thick skull!" he said, pitching his voice to carry without being loud. Even so, it raised echoes that made a few men look uneasily about them. It also caused the eager ones to slow their pace.

"Well and good," Conan said. "This tunnel may go straight under the lake to bring us out in the quarters of Chabano's women. It may also wind like the trail of a drunken crocodile. Reckon that we've a good way to go, and guard your wind!"

After that, Conan had no problem with the over-eager and was able to follow his own advice, stalking along in silence. Nothing seemed to hint of danger, but his eyes were never still and his hand never far from the hilt of his sword. From time to time, he also looked back to see if Emwaya had sensed anything else untoward.

The band's pace was that of the Ichiribu warrior when the ground was level and endurance rather than great speed was most urgently required. Conan judged that they must have covered a good two leagues before they halted for a brief rest.

The Cimmerian set guards and put those warriors carrying gear—ropes, hooks, torches, and heavy hunting spears—to inspecting their burdens. The others he allowed to sprawl at their ease. A black look or two discouraged broaching water gourds, and no one as yet was hungry.

"We must be a good halfway to the Kwanyi shore," Valeria whispered. "*If* we are marching in the direction I think we are."

"I think we're on that route myself," Conan said. "Of course, we could both be—"

He broke off as a sound that was neither sob nor scream but had something of both in it reached him. He whirled to see two warriors drop weapons and shields and leap to support Emwaya. Her legs were trembling, unable to hold her upright, her eyes were closed, and as Conan watched, she clapped both hands over her ears.

What she was hearing might have been heard with the ears of her magic. The next moment, everyone heard it with the ears of his body.

Stones cracked and crumbled, then fell with crashes that filled the

tunnel with thundering echoes. Emwaya was not the only one now with hands held over ears.

Conan's bellow rose above the stone-noise and raised echoes of its own. "The next man who drops a weapon, I'll give it back sideways!" Warriors hastily slung shields and raised spears.

Then, without orders, they began taking battle formation. The baggage bearers dropped their loads and formed a circle around the gear. Emwaya was half carried, half dragged into that circle and deposited with little ceremony on a rolled-up rope ladder.

"See to Emwaya," Conan said. That was his last order for a time. None of his words could have been heard, and indeed, none were needed. Something far too close and far too large was slithering over rock, hissing as it came.

The messenger ran up to Seyganko as if his loin-guard had caught fire or a leopard swam the lake to pursue him. Before the man could speak, Seyganko saw what none among the Ichiribu had seen in many years—Dobanpu Spirit-Speaker running.

He ran up to Seyganko at a fine pace for a man his age and waited only long enough to catch his breath before speaking. "We must launch the canoes at once. There is more danger than I had thought."

"You do not think, father of Emwaya, if you believe we can launch the canoes now. Hardly half of them are loaded, and more than a third of the warriors are not yet on the shore."

"Then we set out with what is ready to hand."

Seyganko realized the depth of his anger only when he felt the shaft of the trident in his hand crack. He forced himself to speak more calmly.

"Who is in danger?"

"Those who have gone below. I must be closer to them than I am here, to aid Emwaya against the peril."

"What peril?" Seyganko did not have it in him to call his betrothed's father a liar, as Dobanpu did not have it in him to lie. But he would be cursed if he would fling the tribe half-ready into battle without knowing whither he flung it!

"What lives beneath the lake—where Emwaya found no life—it lives, wakes, and moves upon those who have gone below. Emwaya will need my aid if the warrior's weapons are to slay it."

Seyganko knew that these near riddles were as much as he would hear without forfeiting time he and his warriors might not have. Still—

"Dobanpu, take a canoe and six of the strongest paddlers ready to hand. Guide them where you wish. I will order the others to gather as swiftly as possible, then come after you with two more canoes."

Dobanpu also seemed to realize that he could expect no more. He departed at a brisk trot.

Seyganko raised his voice, calling the messengers and drummers of the *fanda* to him. As he ran down to the shore, Dobanpu's canoe was already pushing out into the lake, and the drummers were hard at work. The rattle and boom of the talking drums rolled across shore and water as Seyganko leaped into a canoe and seized the nearest paddle.

Twenty or thirty picked warriors would be enough to guard Dobanpu against any human foe. It was drawing on toward sunset, and the Kwanyi feared the lake even more by night than by day.

As for other foes—if Dobanpu was not their equal, then the fewer warriors the Ichiribu lost, the better. The tribe would not long outlive their Spirit-Speaker, but the warriors could still take a good toll of Chabano's men. That would give them honor among the gods, and the thanks of those tribes downriver whom the Kwanyi might then be too weak to conquer.

Seyganko's paddle dipped deep as he raised his voice in the oldest and most potent of the Ichiribu war chants.

Ryku heard the signal drums from the lookout post on what the Kwanyi called Great Gourd Hill. It neither grew large gourds nor had the shape of one, so Ryku had always wondered how it came by its name.

It was, however, the perfect spot for a keen-eyed watcher to look all the way to the island of the Ichiribu. With a trifle of aid from Ryku, some of the watchers had gained more than human sight; they could even see canoes putting out from the island.

This, the drums told him, was just what was happening. Ryku placed the wooden tablet he had been studying in the herb-steeped deer hide that protected it from both damp and magic alike. He wrapped the hide about the tablet and put it in the carved chest that stood in one corner of his chamber. That chest was the one thing he had brought with him when he came to Thunder Mountain. It was a gift from the man whom he had called Father, and always made him feel less clanless and kinless.

Now the very gods could not do that. He was First Speaker to the Living Wind, for all that he seldom used the title. His clan and his kin were alike not of this earth, and thus it must be. Had he risen to the rank of Speaker by other means, he might have felt some kinship with the other Speakers, but as matters stood, they also were alien and untrustworthy.

Ryku stepped out of his chamber, touched the pouch at his belt for good luck, and unbound the reed curtain over his door. The hanging fell back across the door as he turned and walked away, toward the Cave of the Living Wind.

The slithering ended in a crash that sounded like a battering ram striking a stone wall. In the next moment, Conan knew that his ears had not lied.

From a side tunnel to their rear, stones larger than a man rolled in dust and thunder. Smaller stones flew as if hurled from a siege-engine. Some crashed against the far wall, spraying shards in all directions. Others struck flesh. Shards and stones together left three warriors lifeless and two more limping or holding useless arms.

Those two were the first prey of the Golden Serpent as it lunged from its lair into the tunnel.

Its teeth sank into one, and the man howled in agony for a dreadful moment before going limp. The teeth were as long as Conan's fingers, set in a jaw the length of a horse's head, and it hardly mattered if they were venomous or not.

The other man died as a tail thicker than his own body swept him against the wall. He did not scream, but the cracking of skull and crunching of bones were loud enough to tell plainly of his fate.

Other men did cry out, though, at what they saw then. Around the two bodies a sickly green light flickered. It was what one might have seen over a noisome swamp, the sort said to be haunted, one to which wise men gave a wide berth. It was the color of the scum on the most stagnant water of such a swamp. If he had ever seen a less wholesome color in his life, Conan could not remember it.

What he did remember was that Emwaya was in the rear, and that her fate and that of all of them were entwined. He turned back, to reach her just as she leaped from the arms of the men holding her. She ran at the Golden Serpent, raising high overhead one hand and clutching the amulet about her neck with the other.

The creature hissed loudly enough to cause echoes, and its toothed jaws gaped so that Conan had much too clear a view of its mouth. The mouth was green and ridged, except where it was smeared with the blood of the serpent's first victim. Far back in the mouth, the swamp-glow flickered.

A brighter light blazed from the Golden Serpent's many-jeweled eyes. At another time and place, the jewel-light might have been lovely. Now it was only one more horror.

At Emwaya's gesture, the serpent reared half its length from the floor. Its horned muzzle crashed against the ceiling, shaking loose dust and pebbles. Its tail thrashed about, nearly striking down one man bolder than the rest in retrieving his baggage.

From nose to tail, the creature seemed longer than a small galley, and thicker around the middle than a good-sized tree. The golden scales were as large as good pewter serving platters and overlapped as cunningly as was the best Aquilonian plate armor. Some were faded to a pale yellow, even to a near white. Conan saw that many had been cracked, or had even broken clear across, then healed.

The boldest warrior of all ran past Emwaya, shield slung, spear in both hands. He leaped and thrust in a single fluid motion, and his spearhead vanished between two pallid scales.

The Golden Serpent shook like a tree in a gale. Still gripping his spear, the warrior flew into the air, legs waving. The serpent's head dipped, and the jaws closed on one of the man's feet. The warrior did not cry out. Instead, he mustered all his strength to drive the spear in deeper.

He succeeded, in the moment that the serpent's teeth severed his leg halfway up the calf. He screamed then, but did not fall. He remained suspended in the air, held up by nothing anyone could see, while the too-familiar greenish light played about the blood spraying from the stump of his leg.

At last he fell, still gripping the spear. His fall jerked the weapon from the serpent's neck, and greenish blood spurted forth. Where it struck the floor, smoke rose, and where it fell on the corpse of the man crushed by the tail, the flesh charred to ashes and crumbled from the bone.

If Conan had ever doubted the stark horror of the magic lurking in these depths, he doubted no longer. He also doubted that he would ever again put himself in danger for fire-stones.

Emwaya staggered back into his arms, her hands held in front of her in a warding gesture. "Quickly," she whispered. "Have another man throw a

spear."

"You!" Conan called. The iron self-command in his voice steadied the warriors. The man addressed drew back and put all the force of his best throw behind the spear. It struck not far from the wound made by the first warrior.

A scale cracked across; this time the blood only oozed out. As Conan watched, the wound from the first spear closed. Only a smear of blood on the serpent's neck showed that it had ever taken any hurt. Another smear was already drying on the floor, not far from the corpse of the man who had lost his foot to the serpent. That man's bones were even now showing through his flesh, and through the green foulness that played over and around it.

Emwaya drew in a great, rasping breath. "We must keep it coming at us, and wound it each time it comes. We must keep our distance, too. It heals itself somewhat each time it is wounded, but not altogether. It will lose strength; I will see to that."

"How long will it take to die?"

The Golden Serpent hissed in challenge, pain, and defiance. The hiss again raised such echoes that Emwaya could not have made herself heard had she shouted into Conan's ear.

As the serpent withdrew some ten paces or so, Emwaya spoke urgently. "It will die swiftly if my father comes to join his Spirit-Speaking to mine. We can take from it the power to steal life-force, which is how it heals as it does."

Conan thought uncharitable words about sorcerers. It seemed that the breed was always with you when you did not want them and somewhere else when you did.

"Ho!" he shouted, raising his sword. "We've need to fight this beast by retreating before it. Baggage men, take the rear rank. The best spearmen, take the foremost. Guard Emwaya at all costs, and for the love of every god, *don't close with the monster!*"

Faces showed that the bravest warrior needed no urging on that last point. Conan snatched up a spear from the baggage and joined the rear rank as Valeria ran to stand beside Emwaya.

As if they were all of a single mind, the band drew back ten paces. Encouraged, the serpent lowered its head and came on, but it did not lunge so boldly this time. A spear and a trident flew. The spear sank deep, the trident glanced off the horn on the nose. The trident-thrower would

have dashed forward to retrieve his weapon but for Conan's wordless roar that halted him in his tracks.

This was likely enough as strange a battle as Conan had ever fought. Overgrown snakes were not uncommon—too common by half if the wounds he had taken whilst battling them were any measure. But he had not before fought a serpent that had its own magic, nor fought one as leader of a band of warriors.

A good band, too, he thought as he saw one of the slingers wind up and hurl his stone. It flew true, striking one of the blazing green eyes. Conan expected the eye to shatter rather than burst, but it did neither. Instead, it merely quivered like jelly, turned misty and pale for a moment, then blazed green once more.

The creature hissed, and this time, anyone could tell that it was in pain. Emwaya bit her lip until blood came, then screamed out a warning.

"Be ready, everyone. He'll lunge again!"

The warning was life to at least three men. The great head crashed down where they would have been standing had they not joined the retreat. Twenty paces to the rear, the band stood again, save for two men who remained behind to thrust spears in deep. Again Conan's roar saved one from folly as the man struck at the beast's nose with his club. The warrior rejoined his comrades without his club or spear, but with a whole skin.

Then the band put another thirty paces between itself and the Golden Serpent, while Emwaya not only waved both arms, but chanted loud enough to drown out the sound of the creature's hissing. The two spears remained in the wounds longer than before, and the gush of blood that pushed them out also flowed longer.

Victory could be theirs, Conan realized, for all that this was a battle that only a madman could have dreamed. Victory might be the last man of the band standing beside the dead serpent, but they would have it!

Then the hissing raised echoes again, Emwaya called a sharp warning, and the deadly dance began once more.

FIFTEEN

The canoes were not the lightest or the swiftest among those of the Ichiribu, although their canoe-builders were honored among all the tribes around the Lake of Death for their skill. Nor were the paddlers the

strongest and most skilled.

Seyganko had simply ordered the first score of paddlers into the first three canoes, and all of them had set out under Dobanpu's guidance. Before long, Seyganko thought he might have done better to have waited, picked the best paddlers and canoes, and then made swifter progress. If they were slow in reaching their destination, Emwaya might die. Dobanpu had made that plain.

A little while later, however, Seyganko saw that the canoes were flying across the water as if the paddlers were tireless gods who never missed a stroke. He looked back to the Spirit-Speaker, sitting in the stern of their canoe, and saw a faint smile on the man's face.

Seyganko felt shame that his mistake had been recognized, but also pride that Dobanpu considered him worthy of help in undoing it. Or was it entirely Emwaya's safety that moved her father?

The paddles indeed flew back and forth so swiftly that as with well-thrown spears, the eye could hardly follow them. Nor did the warriors seem to sweat or grow short of breath. Seyganko remembered uneasily that such spells as doubled a man's strength could also weaken him for some time afterward. These warriors would have to fight as well as paddle before another day's sun had set.

Meanwhile, they were crossing the Lake of Death at a speed never before known, save to birds. At a shout from Dobanpu, Seyganko raised his paddle, and the men of his canoe ceased their efforts. The other two canoes drew up alongside and also drifted to a stop.

Then, before Seyganko could speak or even move, Dobanpu stood up in the stern of the canoe, gripped the amulet about his neck tightly, and flung himself overboard. He cut the water without a sound, not even the faint *cloop* of a diving fisherbird. For a moment, they saw his legs thrusting him down into the depths; then those depths swallowed him.

A clamor arose from those warriors who had breath left with which to speak.

"Why, the old fool!"

"Where is he going?"

"He'll drown!"

"No, the lionfish will have him first!"

"He can't swim!"

Seyganko shouted for silence. "My woman's father can swim, that is

certain. There are no hungry fish in this part of the lake, because of the very thing he has gone to fight. As for the rest—I would not call any Spirit-Speaker a fool. Not when I thought he might come back and remember what I said.

"And if you still think otherwise, keep your tongue between your teeth. Or have you forgotten who may be listening over there?" Seyganko pointed at the Kwanyi shore. Those who had not already fallen silent did so now.

The Golden Serpent had taken the lives of two more warriors before Conan's band mastered the art of fighting it. That made ten dead or hurt past fighting, and the rest were growing uneasy. Facing a foe who could not be gravely hurt, and—it seemed—not be killed, for all that Emwaya promised otherwise, was nothing to hearten a warrior.

Yet the warriors lost none of their speed or cunning. They darted about the serpent like flies about a horse's head, stinging with the same remorseless persistence. Some even sang war songs between lunges at the serpent, until Conan commanded them to save their breath.

This disciplined courage pleased Conan, although it did not altogether surprise him. He had known for years that the Black Kingdoms raised warriors fit to stand in battle anywhere in the world. He had not expected to find so many this far inland, but he rejoiced that he had. Perhaps there would be more than one man left standing when the Golden Serpent breathed its last.

A cry rose as Emwaya stumbled on the glassy floor. But Valeria was standing over her, sword in one hand, a borrowed spear poised to throw in the other. Five more warriors were in front of Emwaya before Conan was able to count them. The young woman herself shook her head and clenched her teeth, but her hair had saved her skull, and her hands continued their movements, fighting the Golden Serpent's unnatural life.

She was on her feet in the next moment, and Conan saw that the serpent had not lunged for her or her defenders. Was it learning the dangers of well-wielded iron, or was its strength finally ebbing?

Conan knew the perils of believing that a foe was weak or foolish. Yet he found it hard to believe that anything short of Thunder Mountain itself could resist the battering his band had given the Golden Serpent.

Suddenly thunder crashed once more through the tunnel. Conan swore that he saw the Golden Serpent rise a handbreadth from the floor. He knew that he saw shields snatched from warriors' arms and cracks appear

in the ceiling. Then fragments of stone rattled down everywhere about them, and a dripping-wet Dobanpu stood before them—on the far side of the Golden Serpent.

The serpent might have been shaken. The warriors certainly were. Yet the beast was swift to coil and lunge at Dobanpu. The Spirit-Speaker stood to meet the assault, only fingering his amulet. Valeria and a half-score of warriors cried out in horror, and Conan himself was not silent.

The lunge fell short of Dobanpu. An arm's length from the man, the great fanged head was dragged to a stop, as if a noose had tightened about it or the air had turned solid. Dobanpu raised a hand, and coruscating golden light arched from Emwaya to him. It sank into him and vanished, leaving no trace except for perhaps an odd glow in his eyes, and Conan could not be sure that was not a trick of the light.

Then Dobanpu turned, and with a speed startling for a man of his age, ran down a side tunnel that no one had noticed before. Again men gasped in horror, but Emwaya only frowned.

"Has your father gone mad?" Valeria snapped. Conan shook his head. If Emwaya was not afraid, Dobanpu must have some scheme in mind. To make it succeed was another matter.

"What must we do?" he asked the girl.

"He will lead the creature to a place he has sensed, I think. He used much power in coming here, so he will not be able to kill it unaided. But in that place he seeks, he will find a way of ending its life."

Conan cursed himself for expecting a straight answer from any magic-wielder. Valeria glared at Emwaya.

"You want us to follow that thing down some burrow where it might turn and rend us? Trusting only to your father's wizardry?"

"Yes."

"Cimmerian—"

"Call me names afterward. Meanwhile, would you wager two hairs of your head on our surviving if Dobanpu dies?"

As always, Valeria saw reason. She leaped out in front of the warriors and waved her sword. "Come on, you dogs' leavings! It's turned its back to us, and that means it's fleeing!"

The warriors might not have understood all of Valeria's words. Those who understood might not have believed that she spoke the truth. All

understood and believed that they should not let the Blue-Eyed Chief's shield-woman shame them by leading the charge. War cries echoed nearly as loud as the thunderclap of Dobanpu's appearance, and the Ichiribu warriors plunged after their foe.

Ryku gazed down into the whirlpool of light that was the Living Wind—or at least its outward form. He stood on the outermost rim of the ledge, rather than sitting in the First Speaker's seat.

He had never felt at ease in that seat, and now it was more important than ever that he do nothing to make himself feel uneasy. It *might* be only a tale that the Living Wind could sense when those in its presence were afraid, or unsure of themselves, but such tales often held bits of truth.

Also, Ryku did not altogether like what he saw now when he gazed down into the Living Wind. That it was unveiled by the smoke, long a tradition in the ritual, mattered little. Indeed, he had not called up the smoke, thinking it an outworn custom.

The hues of the Living Wind were still crimson and sapphire, swirling in patterns that both held and repelled the eye. But the crimson now seemed the color of old blood, while the sapphire was growing steadily paler.

Also, there was a distant sound that seemed to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. It was a sound hard to find words to describe. To Ryku, it seemed that if bees could chant war cries, the sound might be rather like what he was hearing.

Even the smell of the Cave of the Living Wind had altered. It had always been fresh and cool, in spite of being far below the slopes of Thunder Mountain, with few natural passages for air. Now the odor of the jungle seemed to be overtaking the cave, or at least the odor of some sort of life.

Why not? Ryku told himself that the Living Wind had earned its name fairly, so why should it not take on some of the qualities of life when it began to change?

He had to use all of the disciplines he had learned so as not to be uneasy at that thought, nonetheless. Yet again, why should it be a surprise? Mighty and ancient magic was being wielded in this land, magic left untouched for centuries, and the very gods of Thunder Mountain might be waking.

Ryku now thought he had calmed himself enough to sit down in the chair of the First Speaker. *Let the gods wake*, he told himself. *Let them wake, and they will see that I am their friend and my enemies are theirs.*

Then I will not even need Dobanpu, not when I have gods for friends.

Emwaya seemed to be speaking to her father without words, and her gestures guided the war band on the trail of the Golden Serpent. They might not have needed that guidance, for the creature now hissed almost continuously, and left smears of blood that grew thicker as it writhed along.

Conan held his tongue. He would not allow his own hopes to rise, let alone those of the band. False hope made warriors careless, and careless warriors died in the face of less formidable foes than the Golden Serpent.

The band certainly ran faster with Emwaya guiding them than they would have dared otherwise. Indeed, Conan did not know how far they had come, or how much longer some of the warriors could keep up the pace. Those with baggage were beginning to breathe hard, and some of those with slight wounds clearly would need rest before long.

Conan did not like to think of dividing the band, leaving the baggage and the lightly wounded behind. Once divided in these depths, could the band ever unite again? Also, the Golden Serpent might have ways of doubling back on its tracks, to fall on such easy prey.

A familiar smell began to tickle the Cimmerian's nostrils. Not one he remembered with pleasure, on the whole, although the giant fungi had certainly saved him and Valeria on their first journey underground. But when one has fed off something for so long, the smell lingers in memory.

They were approaching another cave full of the giant fungi. Conan wondered what purpose that might serve, as the Golden Serpent was plainly a meat-eater. Emwaya was too lost in speaking with her father to answer to anything save a shout in her ear, and Conan had no wish to break her bond with Dobanpu.

The floor sloped more sharply downward now, and the patches of green blood were not only thicker, but fresher. The warriors had to slow their onrush, to avoid stepping in the still-fuming green patches of death and agony. One warrior was unlucky enough to go down nonetheless, but leaped up at once, holding a blistered hand over his head like a trophy.

"It bleeds! It bleeds, and does not stop! Come, brothers, and we shall make it bleed to death!"

Then the tunnel bent sharply, and now the blood smeared the walls as well as the floor. Conan took the lead again, with Valeria just behind him. Around this bend, the serpent might be lying in wait, even if Dobanpu was

alive and well, as he seemed to be, judging by the way Emwaya looked.

Then a sudden battering-ram stroke of the serpent's head caught an unsuspecting warrior to Conan's left. No teeth pierced the man, but the horn caught his shoulder and hurled him against the wall. Conan heard his skull crack.

The Cimmerian leaped and thrust in the same motion. His sword slashed deep through scales into the flesh under the serpent's throat. The scales parted, and blood spurted from a gash a sword's length wide, deeper than any wound the beast had taken thus far.

This time, the hiss was nearly a roar, with an ugly, bubbling note. Blood sprayed Conan, Valeria, Emwaya, and several warriors. As it had not done before, it stung. Conan blinked his eyes clear, wiped off his mouth with the back of his hand, and glanced at his sword-blade. There was no harm to it as far as he could see.

Then they heard Dobanpu calling from beyond the serpent, "Have fire ready! When I lead the beast among the earth-fruits, you must cast fire upon them!"

Conan and Valeria spent no time in wondering at the sense of Dobanpu's call. The serpent now writhed in a broader patch of tunnel, half-choked with the fungi. Emwaya's eyes also discouraged questions.

"Flint and steel to the fore! And a torch! Hurry!" Valeria shouted.

A man ran up from the baggage bearers. Valeria struck a spark with flint and steel into the dried, oil-soaked grass at the head of one of the torches. It blazed up, with flame that was no natural yellow or orange, but a violet hue as sickening as the serpent's blood, as sickening as the magic the creature used for eating life-force.

Valeria held the torch at arm's length as the serpent backed slowly deeper into the fungus. Conan stood beside her, sword and spear alike ready. He saw Dobanpu raise a hand and fling what seemed to be a goblet of the serpent's own blood into its face. He saw the serpent lunge forward, then halt, its head buried deep in a mass of the fungi as tall as two men.

Before Dobanpu or Emwaya could speak, Valeria flung the torch. It soared over the serpent's back and plunged into the piled fungi.

Flames puffed up, of the same virulent purple hue as the torch-flame. Thick smoke of similar color rose above them. The Golden Serpent quivered from nose to tail, then flung its head up as if trying to pierce the ceiling to seek the open sky.

It failed. As the monster rose, Conan saw that smoke and flames were

pouring from those wounds still open. Green blood turned black; then golden scales around the wounds also blackened. Smoke rose up from throat and body, and at last began pouring from the eyes.

When smoke belched from the serpent's mouth, Conan threw an arm around Valeria's shoulders and drew her close. He could feel her shuddering. He sheathed his sword, dropped his spear, and drew Emwaya close with his other arm.

They stood that way as the flames they had kindled with the aid of Dobanpu's magic devoured both the fungi and the Golden Serpent. The brute was tenacious of its life to the end. Not until the scales were mostly fallen from the flesh did it stop writhing. Even then Conan thought he heard a faint scraping in the middle of the roaring flames, as if the serpent were still twitching feebly.

That was the Golden Serpent's last sign of life. Smoke was rising so thickly now that Conan and others were binding strips of cloth across their mouths and noses. Some wetted the strips as well. Emwaya stared into the smoke, with it plain on her face that she feared for her father.

Then the smoke eddied and disgorged the staggering figure of Dobanpu. He was coughing like a man in the grip of lung-fever, and so nearly blind that he all but spitted himself on Valeria's sword as he rushed up. Valeria and Emwaya held the Spirit-Speaker while he coughed his lungs clear, then gave him water. When he could speak, he nodded his thanks and then gasped:

"We must hasten from here! I do not know how long this fire will burn, nor how much smoke it will yield. The whole underground may become unfit for life."

"I rejoice!" Valeria cried. "We are saved from the Golden Serpent only to stifle like rabbits in a burrow!"

"Save your breath for running," Emwaya said, "and you may not find yourself short of it!" It was the first time in a long while that she had spoken with her old sharpness. Conan took that as a favorable omen; Valeria seemed to think otherwise.

She did follow Emwaya's advice nonetheless. Like the others, she was silent as they hurried back up the tunnel, the smoke thickening behind them.

"Wobeku," the Kwanyi warrior said, "a messenger has come from the watchers of the great crack in the earth."

Wobeku sat up and shook sleep from his head. One of these days, they might use some honorific for him. At least they had given over calling him "the chief's Ichiribu."

"What is the message?"

"He smells smoke."

"Smoke, as from a fire?"

"So he said."

Wobeku rose and girded himself for battle. When that was done, he was fully awake. It was also then that he noticed that the jungle was more silent than usual. Many of the common night birds and insects did not live down by the Kwanyi shore, but the jungle was neither lifeless nor silent under the moon.

Until now. Wobeku felt a chill in his loins. He sensed that he was about to be called on to fight a foe not wholly of this earth.

"See that the drums warn Chabano and Ryku," he ordered. "Have the guards at the lesser crack drive the logs we have ready into it." That would be of no avail against unearthly foes, but if anyone human tried to come through that crack, he would face a long night of ax-work before he succeeded.

"Gather the guards about the great crack," he concluded. "Not too close, but every man is to be fully armed. The baggage boys and the women are to take the trail back to the villages. At once!"

The man almost made the gesture of respect to a chief before he remembered to whom he was making it. Instead, he nodded and ran off.

Wobeku did not run, but he moved at a brisk trot as he headed down the trail toward what he knew might be his last battle. The drums were talking before he was halfway to his post.

SIXTEEN

Conan's band would have gladly run from the smoke faster than they had run from the Golden Serpent. There was no need to stop and thrust a spear at the swirling purple wall hard on their heels.

If only they could breathe! Heat followed the smoke, and long tendrils of both smoke and heat seemed to clutch at the fleeing men like jungle vines. Conan ventured a look behind him, took one of the tendrils squarely in the face, and nearly coughed himself into a fit.

His feet kept moving by a will of their own, however, until his wits ruled them again. He did not falter or fall, and neither did most of the band. Those who did, their comrades lifted and carried along.

No one wanted to see a comrade overtaken by this new peril. It was impossible to imagine living within that purple murk, even had not strange shapes lurked there. Conan had seen them, Valeria had seen them, and even Emwaya and Dobanpu admitted they were there.

The two Spirit-Speakers did not, however, say what those shapes might be. That was about as much as Conan expected of any sorcerer, and he was not much for being rude to those who had saved his life. So he followed Emwaya's advice to keep his breath for running.

"Here we turn," Dobanpu called. He pointed at a narrow slit in the wall to the right. Dried mud lay on the floor about it, and a smell of jungle rot warred with the smoke-reek.

As an escape route, it looked unpromising. But Dobanpu seemed confident, and so far, he had proven trustworthy. Also, Conan had no wish to wait for the fire to burn itself out. Already there was more smoke and heat than all the fungi in all these caves could have produced. Magic was in this fire, magic of a kind that sensible men escaped as quickly as possible, even if they did have a momentarily friendly sorcerer in company.

"Up!" Conan shouted, pointing at the gap. It was a measure of his authority, or of their desperation, that four warriors plunged in without hesitation. Four more followed, carrying the rope ladders and other climbing gear. Before any more could go, Emwaya darted in.

Dobanpu's howl caused her to thrust her head back into view. "Father, I can climb faster than you. Who knows what lies above, or what arts we may need against it? Be ready to help me if I call."

Then she vanished. Dobanpu looked about wildly, no longer a sorcerer, but a father seeing his child plunge into danger. "Valeria!" Conan called. "I'll take the rear. You join the vanguard and see to Emwaya!"

Valeria left with the next handful of warriors. The men were, in fact, now disappearing so fast that Conan wondered if the way to the surface was easier than he had dared believe. If they found stairs—

"Conan!" Valeria called. "There are stairs up to the surface, and open *sky* above! Make haste!"

Conan needed no urging. The tendrils of smoke seemed to curl about his ankles, then his knees, then his waist. He drew his sword and hacked at

them as if they were living foes, and saw them retreat. But his sword was growing hot to his touch, and he knew that if the main mass of smoke surrounded him, he was lost.

Dobanpu shouted three harsh syllables, then reeled against the wall as if the blood had rushed from his head. Conan watched the wall of smoke draw back as the Golden Serpent had done, and felt the heat diminish. Then he all but flung the Spirit-Speaker through the gap and followed him.

The stairs were there, and—incredibly—the Cimmerian could indeed see stars shining above. He dragged Dobanpu toward the rise, but the Spirit-Speaker held back.

"I must restore the guardian spells on these stairs," he gasped, "or the smoke-bringer will follow us, catch us halfway up, burn us in mid-stride—"

"As you wish," Conan said. Arguing with a sorcerer was more futile than fighting with one. The Cimmerian had won battles with many sorcerers, but had won arguments with few.

This spell called for more than three times three syllables. When Dobanpu was done, the gap behind them was yet dark with smoke, but the tendrils did not escape. The air in the stairwell remained musty but clean as Conan and the Spirit-Speaker mounted.

They had just caught up with the rearmost warrior when, from above, Emwaya screamed.

The scream floated across the dark lake to Seyganko's canoe. Everyone in the three leading canoes heard it, but only Seyganko heard it in his mind. He desperately sought a message in the scream.

Emwaya! What is the danger? Where are you?

No answer came. He knew that for her cry to reach him this far out in the lake, she had to be close to the shore. Also, she had to be on or close to the surface of the earth.

This gave neither knowledge nor consolation. He thrust his paddle in deep and looked behind him. Then he gave his war cry with all the breath in his body, and thrust again with his paddle.

Without magic, with nothing but their strength and their sweat, the other warriors were overtaking him. A hundred of the Ichiribu's best fighters had gone to the mainland, to defend the herds and crops. Of the rest, four hundred had taken to their canoes to challenge the Kwanyi on

their own shore. Only a handful remained behind to guard the island.

As if Seyganko's war cry had been a signal, torches sparked to life in the bows of the oncoming canoes. It seemed as though a line of fire was advancing across the lake behind Seyganko.

He held his paddle aloft like a spear until the leading canoes were almost abreast of his craft. Then he tossed the paddle, caught it, and gave his war cry again. This time, the warriors gave it back to him so that it seemed to fill the night and the lake, from shore to shore. If the Kwanyi had not known what was coming, they could hardly be ignorant of it now.

Seyganko began paddling again. The brief sense of triumph left him as he realized that he had heard nothing more from Emwaya, neither with his ears nor with his mind.

Conan took the stairs two at a time, for all that they were crumbling and moss-grown. Once he nearly missed his footing and fell back. He gripped a root with one hand and caught himself in time so as not to squash Dobanpu like a grape.

The stairs ended at a man's height from the surface, but to picked Ichiribu warriors, that distance was but a child's leap; they had already reached solid ground by the time Conan joined them.

The first thing he saw was a warrior falling with a Kwanyi spear in his thigh. Conan snatched the man's shield and drew his own sword, then whirled, searching for Emwaya and Valeria.

He found them by a tree lifted half off the ground by its gnarled, twisted roots, each root thicker than the Golden Serpent. Valeria was hacking at the spears of half a dozen Kwanyi warriors, while two other warriors already had Emwaya. Had their comrades so eager to close with Valeria not blocked them, they would have by now made off with the girl.

The warriors whirled to face Conan, tangling their shields one with another in their haste. This was fatal to one warrior left unshielded. Conan brusquely slashed the man's head from his shoulders, then leaped back to give him room to fall.

The rest of the Kwanyi formed their shield-line. In the next moment, they learned that others besides themselves could master that art, and not only by the tutelage of Chabano the Great. Conan beat down one spear with his sword, hooked his shield around the edge of a second man's spear, and kicked upward. He was barefooted, but his soles were as tough as leather and the kick had all the power of his leg behind it.

The man screamed and reeled against a comrade, who fell out of position. Conan fainted at that man, forcing him to raise his shield. Then he slashed under the shield, taking the man's leg below the knee.

A spear thrust past Conan's ribs, nearly gouging his side, and he whirled again to chop the spear-shaft in two with his sword. Then he charged the man like a bull, driving the shield back against his opponent's chest until the man lowered it to see clearly. The man's last sight was of Conan's broadsword descending to split his headdress, hair, and skull.

Valeria cut down another opponent, and the last of the Kwanyi warriors took only a brief look at the odds they faced after the death of their friends before fleeing into the night. Conan swung his shield hard into the back of one man holding Emwaya and heard the spine crack. Valeria leaped on the other, jerked his head back with fingers twined in his hair, and slashed his throat.

Emwaya stood free, clasping her arms across her breasts, her eyes on the ground for a moment. Then she seemed to shrug a great weight from her shoulders.

"Father?"

Dobanpu strode up and put out a hand to touch his daughter as if not quite believing she was real. She gripped the hand and smiled.

"I am well, I think."

"Time to be sure later," Dobanpu said. He gripped his amulet with one hand and his belt pouch with the other. "The God-Men may not be what they were. I have sensed quarrels that perhaps have weakened them. But if they still command the Living Wind—"

Kwanyi war cries interrupted him. Conan threw down the shield, wiped his sword on it, and drew his dagger.

"The Living Wind can wait. Someone close at hand still commands warriors!" He pushed Emwaya into her father's arms, then called to Valeria.

"Find a path to the shore and see if we can draw back toward it. This place is worthless now. We want our backs to the water!"

Fleet-footed as ever, Valeria vanished into the night. From the jungle beyond, Kwanyi warriors came bursting through the undergrowth.

Wobeku led the warriors attacking the enemy who had sprung from the earth. Not only his honor drove him forward to that place; he knew that if

the Kwanyi gained the victory with him at their head, he would have a warrior's name among them.

Had he run faster, he might have plunged among the Ichiribu before they could order their ranks. He would then have died but would have won with his life sufficient time for his comrades to strike the scattered enemy. Then not even the Cimmerian's swiftness, skill, and steel might have saved them.

Wobeku instead brought his men to the field as Chabano had taught. He put them into their proper line before he ordered the advance, and only darted out ahead of it at the last moment.

Behind him, the Kwanyi line came out of the trees somewhat disordered by encounters with the underbrush. The first volley of light spears went mostly astray. One spear even gouged Wobeku's leg. He howled out his fury at that fool in a war cry and let the Kwanyi come up with him.

A swung stone cracked against his shield. Wobeku stepped forward and ducked his head. This time, the stone-swinger looped the line around the top of Wobeku's shield and jerked. Wobeku did not let go of the shield. Instead, he let himself be drawn forward, then leaped and lunged. The stone-swinger died with Wobeku's spear in his belly.

"*Yaygo!*" Wobeku cried, the ritual proclamation of a man's first kill of a battle.

The next moment, someone nearly won the right to cry that over him. The Kwanyi at his right suddenly vanished, fallen into the crack in the earth. An Ichiribu warrior darted forward in his place, locking shields with Wobeku and thrusting desperately over, under, and around.

Wobeku took two minor flesh wounds before he was able to riposte with his own spear. It gashed the Ichiribu's belly, but not mortally. The man did not flinch from the pain, either. He kept on thrusting, less skillfully with each passing moment, but with no diminished courage.

This was the kind of battle that to Wobeku showed Chabano to be a wise chief. When engaged in an each-man-for-himself fight, Wobeku had often been unable to press home for the kill. He had feared, with reason, for his flanks and rear. In the Kwanyi shield-line, his flanks were safe, even in such a small battle as this. Had there been the usual second line behind him, his back would also have been guarded.

Wobeku thrust again—and nearly stumbled as his thrust encountered empty air. He stared at the space where his opponent had been, then saw other Kwanyi doing the same. As if by magic, the Ichiribu had vanished.

Before the Kwanyi sprawled only a few bodies and fallen weapons, barely half of them Ichiribu.

Chabano's warriors lived, with no one to fight. Wobeku waved his great spear, ordering a few men over to the crack in the ground to see what might lie within. They found nothing, save footprints that made it plain how the Ichiribu had come.

Come by magic? And if come by magic, had they vanished by the same way? Wobeku knelt and began searching the ground with a hunter's skills. In the dark it was not easy, but he knew that torches would only give any lurking Ichiribu a mark.

His nightsight at last pierced the darkness, showing footprints leading off toward the shore. There were many of them, and some showed the heel scarifications of Ichiribu clans.

Wobeku called the best trackers forward, gave them fresh spears, and sent them on. Their orders: to find where the Ichiribu had gone and send word back, but to refrain from fighting them. A messenger also ran back to the drummers, and soon the drums began talking again.

Whatever the Ichiribu had done below the earth, it was done. Now they likely intended to hold the shore for their oncoming comrades. Wobeku intended to show the enemy band that it needed more than its back to the shore for safety.

A retreat at night over unknown ground was the hardest of all maneuvers in war, or so Conan had heard claimed by those who had earned the right to speak. He had also been both warrior and captain in enough such affairs to believe this the truth.

With ill-ordered men, it was said to be impossible, but the Ichiribu were not ill-ordered. Every man still on his feet when they broke off the battle reached the shore. Some were stumbling, two were carried by comrades, but all were present.

Of warriors fit to fight, however, Conan saw that he had barely twenty. The battle with the Golden Serpent had taken its toll even before the Kwanyi had struck. Many Kwanyi had also surely died, but nevertheless, he did not doubt that his band faced heavy odds.

The plan for this battle called for the Ichiribu to command the trails to the shore so that they might ambush Chabano's warriors as they hurled themselves into battle. Coming to the shore in disarray, Chabano's men would lack time to form their potent shield-line.

Plans, Conan sometimes thought, were for gods, priests, and clerks. Warriors had to make do with luck and a keen edge on their blades.

A glance lakeward encouraged the Cimmerian. With torches blazing, the Ichiribu canoes were racing toward the shore. They would be visible now all across the Kwanyi land, even as far as to Thunder Mountain. The Kwanyi would know what they faced, but that knowledge might drive them to haste.

Haste in war was a two-edged sword. Be there first, and victory might be yours. Be there first but disordered or weak, and your vanguard at least was men thrown away.

A scraping sound made Conan whirl, sword ready to slash at the darkness. A shape took form out of that darkness, and Conan lowered his blade.

"Seyganko. Well met."

"As are you, Cimmerian. How fares Emwaya?"

Conan smiled. The war leader of the Ichiribu *would* ask for his woman first. The Cimmerian wondered if he himself would have such a woman again. There had not been one such since Belit—and Valeria was not the sort to fill *those* shoes!

"Weary, but well. Valeria guards her. How came you here without our seeing you?"

"The canoes with me doused our torches and paddled in silence, I have brought thirty warriors. Surprise is worth much."

So it was, but the hundreds of other warriors now doubtless paddling in circles while waiting for Seyganko's signal were also worth something. Did Seyganko seek surprise or glory—glory bought with the Cimmerian's blood?

No good ever came of a quarrel between chiefs on the verge of a battle to the death. Conan held his tongue, knowing that if Seyganko had been overbold, the young chief would also not see another sunrise.

"Good. Go ask Dobanpu how far forward it is wise for them to come."

"Dobanpu?"

"Also weary, but well. He fears that the gods of Thunder Mountain may be taking a hand in matters tonight. Best not send your men beyond his protection."

Seyganko clearly wanted to know more, but Conan urged him off to the Spirit-Speaker, who could make more sense in relating the battle

underground than could the Cimmerian. Conan himself found a stump not too rotten to support his weight and sat down to clean his steel.

It was not in nature for this lull to last. His band had thrown down a challenge to both men and more than men, and both sorts of foe would be coming on in strength before the night was much older. Conan knew, however, that no man was ever the worse for facing any foe with a clean sword.

SEVENTEEN

The drums, the messengers, and the sightings of his own eyes were giving Chabano uncertain tidings. He nonetheless kept his place at the head of the warriors racing downhill toward the shore.

The drums and his eyes told him that the Ichiribu were on the way across the lake. Messengers told him that by some treachery, or perhaps by some magic, an enemy war band had sprung from the earth and was holding a landing place for the main body of oncoming warriors.

Chabano hoped it was not treachery. It would make enemies for him among the kin of those warriors who had died if trusting Wobeku had shed Kwanyi blood. At least the dead could not number more than a handful, even if Wobeku had contrived their demise.

At Chabano's back there trotted more than five hundred Kwanyi warriors. Each bore the shield and three spears he had devised and taught them to use so well. When they reached the shore, it would hardly be a battle at all.

He did wonder that he had not heard from Ryku. The First Speaker certainly had to know all that was happening, including the magic being unleashed— and not all of it by that doddering Spirit-Speaker Dobanpu!

It did not matter greatly. Dobanpu might have power over Wobeku's blowgun. He would hardly have as much power against five hundred of the Kwanyi's best. There would be spears through the man's throat, heart, and belly before he could speak enough spirits to slay a goat!

Conan had led the Ichiribu ambush party up the path from the shore. Now he crouched under an arching root, trying to find the men he had led. The fewer he found, the better they had learned the art of concealment.

He found one and whistled softly, then pointed to a bush that would hide him better. The man thumped his head three times on the ground.

Conan was ready to curse him for putting courtesy before obedience, but then the man half rolled, half slid into his new hiding place.

He had just vanished when the stamping of many fast-moving feet reached the Cimmerian's ears. Conan drew his dagger and rested his free hand on a pile of small stones he had chosen from a stream-bed.

This would be close work, too close for swords, and the more silent, the better. If a few-score Kwanyi died before they even knew they faced death, Chabano would have a busy time rallying those who survived before Seyganko had all of his men ashore.

That would strain even Chabano's discipline, although the ambush party would be all but juggling live vipers. But then, most battles ended that way, no matter how one began them.

The sound of the Kwanyi on the march swelled, then began to fade. In moments, silence had taken its place. Few ears but Conan's could have heard the softer sound of many men breathing, and commands given in whispers instead of in shouts.

"They're still coming," he murmured to the man next to him. "Pass the word, and have every man look to his rear as well."

If Chabano had grown suspicious, he might well be halting his main column while light-footed scouts beat the bushes ahead and on either side. The Kwanyi would lose time that way, but they might save warriors. They would certainly put Conan and his men in peril.

Conan whispered another command. "When you attack, forget silence! Shout and scream, crack your lungs, burst your throats—"

"Make them think a score are a thousand?" his companion whispered back. The Cimmerian nodded.

Now the sound of marching Kwanyi came again, this time a shuffle as the warriors advanced at a walk. Conan gripped a stone and balanced it, ready to throw.

The first Kwanyi appeared. Conan let him pass, and likewise the nine men after him. The tenth man took the flung stone in the mouth. He staggered back, spitting blood and teeth, into the reach of another Ichiribu. This one held a short spear, which he thrust into the Kwanyi's back.

"Yah-haaaaaa!" Conan roared as he leaped onto the path. He thrust over a lunging spear-point and into a man's chest before the victim could get his shield positioned. He snatched another stone and flung it far up the path, into the shadowy mass of warriors now crowding forward to the

attack.

The faster the warriors crowded forward, however, the less room there was for them to move and fight. Conan had done his best to find a place where the trail was narrow and the ground to either side of it nearly impassable. Chabano was helping by letting the need for haste rule his judgment.

Conan and half a dozen companions kept the head of the column in play for a good while. A moment came when Conan threw his last stone, heard it strike a shield, and drew his sword. With sword and dagger both leaping in his hands as if they had life of their own, he carved away at the front rank of the Kwanyi.

Through the gap Conan made, his companions plunged, thrusting with spears and lashing about with war clubs. Meanwhile, stones, tridents, fallen branches, and any other weapon that came to hand also made their mark on the Kwanyi flanks.

What Conan hoped the most now was that Chabano himself would come forward. Tribal custom and the Paramount Chief's own temper would drive him into a duel with Conan. For that duel, there could be only one outcome.

The ambush could end the battle, and even the war, in an Ichiribu victory. Conan drew back a trifle, keeping his guard up, shirting about to make himself a difficult target for spears, and seeking for any sign of Chabano.

At last he caught sight of a man who undoubtedly was the chief—in the very same moment that the earth shook underfoot.

Ryku had performed all of the rituals for calling up the Living Wind as if he had sucked them in with his mother's milk. Pride and courage flowed through him. He knew he courted no danger in performing the rituals alone, such was his power at last.

Yet the colors of the Living Wind had not returned to their normal hues, save briefly. Again there was an umber tint in the crimson, a paleness in the sapphire. The strange sounds and stranger scent were gone, but the memory of them lingered in Ryku's thoughts. He had to force these thoughts back, as one forced back a boar caught on one's spear, lest they disturb his confidence.

Now came the most demanding ritual of all. Sending the power of the Living Wind entirely outside Thunder Mountain had been done. It could

be done again. If it was done, the Living Wind would fall on the Ichiribu and they would be gone without the wetting of a single Kwanyi spear.

No, Ryku told himself, he would not allow the word "if" in his mind. He *would* call up the Living Wind and send it forth.

He sat straighter and raised his staff in one hand, a gourd of cunningly mixed herbs in the other. He hung the gourd from the end of the staff and dipped into it, catching a pinch of the herbs between thumb and forefinger.

Ritual and good sense alike told a Speaker to begin with only a small measure of the herbs. Ryku leaned forward, opened thumb and forefinger and let the herbs float out into space. They vanished almost at once, lost against the swirling colors of the Living Wind, so that he did not know when they reached it.

He did know, though, when the whole cave shook like a gourd flung against a stone wall. He clutched his staff with one hand and reached for the gourd to draw it to safety.

A whirling column of crimson and sapphire, as bright as ever, leaped upward from the Living Wind. It approached the gourd, touched it, then snatched it from the end of Ryku's staff.

Ryku cried out, rose to his feet and hastened to the ledge to see, amazement bordering on fear sweeping through him, weakening the discipline of his mind. He lunged for the gourd as the column began sinking, taking the gourd with it.

He touched it, too—but the column rose again, and now it had become crimson-and-sapphire flames that wrapped themselves around his wrist. He cried out, an animal scream of agony, as the flames ate through his wrist.

The pain and his all-encompassing fear made him forget that he stood on the very brink of the ledge. He staggered, and one foot came down on empty air. He threw out his remaining hand toward the stone, felt fingernails scabble and break, then plunged.

What Ryku had felt before was as nothing to what he felt when the Living Wind swallowed him. But by then, the roaring of the tumult was too loud for anyone to hear his screams.

"To me! Back down the trail! Now, you goats' bastards!"

Conan's shouts rallied the Ichiribu ambushers. Some of them plunged

off into the forest, their way back to the path barred by the enemy. At least half of the survivors joined the Cimmerian.

With more speed than dignity, they sprinted down the trail, for all that it was shaking beneath them. A tree toppled across their rear, mercifully striking no one. Conan halted then, letting the others go on while he studied the Kwanyi.

He had been afraid that in a panic to leave the hillside, the enemy would rush his men, sweeping them away by sheer weight of numbers. Now that was not to be, for all that Chabano had taken the lead. They were coming on at a good pace, leaving older warriors and boys to gather up the wounded and dead, and perhaps to protect their line of retreat.

Very surely, Chabano's death would take not merely the heart, but the head from the Kwanyi... which would all be very well if Conan had the faintest notion of how to bring it about. A personal challenge would only end with the Cimmerian sprouting a score of spears before Chabano even heard him!

The Cimmerian brought up the rear of the ambush party as it ran down the trail to rejoin its comrades. He had never cared for running, but there were times when a good pair of legs was a man's best weapon.

As the Ichiribu ran, they noticed that the earthquake seemed to have passed, but a strange glow was rising into the sky from the direction of Thunder Mountain.

Chabano let a dozen or so warriors go before him, leaping over the fallen tree ahead. This was no time for him to risk a spear from some desperate Ichiribu lying behind the tree.

No spears came. Chabano leaped high, as he had done when a boy. Landing sent a sharp pain through one knee that reminded him he was *not* a boy, but he did not stumble. His spear was over one shoulder and his shield on the other arm, and he was well in front of his warriors when he saw the sky change color.

It turned crimson and sapphire—and Chabano remembered that those were the colors of the Living Wind. It seemed that Ryku had sent his powers forth after all, and not a moment too soon! If the Kwanyi had to fight all the way down the trail and then face the full strength of unshaken foes, tonight's battle would leave neither tribe with enough men to people a village!

"Waaa-yeh!" he shouted. The Kwanyi took up the cry and obeyed the

command. Feet drummed on hard earth, men screamed in sheer animal delight, and spears clashed on shields.

Meanwhile, the glow above no longer covered half the sky. It was shrinking as the colors grew clearer and brighter. It also seemed that the colors whirled and danced, like an eddy in a stream. Then they shrank still further, into a globe almost too dazzling to look at.

Chabano raised his spear and shield so that the Living Wind might see his marks of rank and know who to obey. Ryku had done well indeed. He was giving over the power of the Living Wind to Chabano himself! The poor fool Ryku—he could not imagine how little hope there was of ever having it returned.

Chabano's joy overcame him. He flung his spear straight into the sky as the globe of whirling crimson and sapphire plunged for him. Light and spear met—and where the spear had been, only charred splinters and drops of melted iron remained. They showered down about Chabano, and surprise as much as pain made him cry out when a drop of metal burned through skin into the flesh of his shoulder.

The warriors behind him cried louder, and he knew that some of them were turning to run. He whirled, unslinging his light throwing spear, vowing to put it through the first man he saw breaking from the column. But instead of one, he saw a dozen men running, and that was the last thing he saw. Before he could throw his spear, the Living Wind was all about him.

As Ryku had done, Chabano screamed while the Living Wind devoured him, but no one heard his screams. With some, it was because they also were dying, but with most, it was because they heard only the blood thundering in their ears as they fled.

Most of Conan's men had reached the shore when they saw the fire on the hill. The Cimmerian himself was still on the trail, with one companion. He sent the man onward and sought a good hiding place to see what might come next.

The earth shook again, more fiercely than before. Conan heard the crackle of falling trees and the screams of Kwanyi warriors caught under them. He also heard other Kwanyi crying out, and not with war cries.

As little as he liked the thought of approaching potent magic, he liked not knowing what enemy he faced even less. Sword in hand, he rose from his hiding place—then knew he need not take a step to find the answer to

what was happening up the trail.

A *being* of crimson-and-sapphire light swirling together, with something of a man's shape but as high as a temple, came striding down the path. Where its—call them feet—struck the earth, smoke rose: the mephitic purple smoke that Conan remembered from underground.

Those same powers from underground were now loose on Thunder Mountain. Why, Conan neither knew nor cared. He hoped only that the Kwanyi, enemies that they were, had fled for their lives. Death in such guise, he would not wish upon a Stygian!

Conan plunged downhill from the trail, knowing that the being could follow him at will if it chose, but hoping that it would follow the easier path of the trail. The specter seemed solid enough not to wish to plough through trees thicker than its legs all the way to the shore.

If Conan had been running for his own life, a Cimmerian's reluctance to turn his back on a foe might have slowed him. Running for the lives of Valeria and all of his Ichiribu friends, he plunged down the hill as if it were level ground in daylight.

The magical light from the monster eased his way somewhat, but there were still many shadows, and too many trees lurking in those shadows. He nearly stunned himself twice, left patches of skin and more than patches of his clothes on bark or twigs, but still had his weapons as he staggered, bloody and cursing, onto the open shore.

He had reached the open a trifle to the north of where the Ichiribu were now gathered. The light of their torches made it plain that they were arrayed to meet a human foe.

Conan cursed louder than before. Spears snapped up and heads turned.

"Into the canoes!" he shouted. "You can't fight with spears what's coming downhill. Seek the water, and hope the thing can't swim!"

A slim figure with smoke-darkened fair hair ran from the circle. "Conan! We thought it had taken you!"

The Cimmerian and his shield-woman had time for only the briefest of embraces before they broke apart, each to lead a band of warriors into a rear guard.

Seyganko was shouting orders to the other warriors to run for the canoes when Dobanpu stepped forward. From the way Emwaya was clutching her father's arm, the old Spirit-Speaker was clearly about something of which she did not approve. Seeing Conan, Dobanpu beckoned.

"Conan! Bid your shield-woman guard this foolish daughter of mine until I have done my work."

"Your work?" Conan knew he must sound like a witling, but in this matter, he understood no more than one.

"I cannot command the spirits to drive off the Living Wind, still less to destroy it. I might have had that power once, or even now, had I not fought the battle underground. But I can contrive a battle of the spirits so that they will do the work for me, like elephants crushing an enemy's village."

"He must—" Emwaya shrieked.

"You must be silent now, and afterward, a good Spirit-Speaker to the Ichiribu," Dobanpu said. "Also, a good wife to Seyganko, who deserves one."

Then Dobanpu cast aside his headdress and other garb. Clad only in amulet, loinguard, and pouch, he walked with the dignity of a king of kings toward the foot of the trail.

He reached the beginning of the rise a few heartbeats before the monstrosity did. There was a moment when the man and the creation of magic seemed to stare at one another. Then Dobanpu leaped, as lightly as any *bidui* boy, soaring high.

He soared higher than any man could have done with unaided muscles, spending the last of his magic to strike the specter in the chest. Conan expected to see Dobanpu rebound from the being, to fall like a torn doll to the ground, and to be crushed to pulp. Instead, he seemed to stick to the being, like a fly caught in honey.

Then smoke swirled up around him... and he was gone. For a moment, Conan thought he saw with half dazzled eyes the dark shape of a man within the shape of the monster. Then even that vanished.

A moment later, so did the being itself. It vanished with a roar of thunder that Conan did not doubt was heard in Bossonia. The windblast it flung out snapped grown trees at the base, tossed canoes end over end, and knocked nearly every man on the shore flat on the sand and gravel.

Conan and Valeria dug in fingers and toes and clung to the beach as they would have clung to the yard of a ship in a gale. Closing their eyes against the hurled sand and gravel, they could only judge what else might be happening by the noise, and most of that was the wind.

At last the wind died out. The shouts and cries did not, however. Conan raised himself on hands and knees and saw the Ichiribu hastily running

from a stretch of the shore that was now covered with molten rock. The lava was pouring from a gap in the earth where Conan judged the being had stood in the moment of its destruction.

As the stream of lava reached the lake, steam erupted. More steam seemed to be rising from inland, doubtless from the stairs where Conan's band had climbed from the tunnels. Then Valeria gripped Conan's arm and pointed out over the water.

The lake itself was in turmoil, whirlpools appearing and disappearing within moments, spray rising, live fish thrashing and more than a few dead ones bobbing on the surface before they were sucked out of sight. Some of the Ichiribu canoes were ablaze, engulfed by the lava, while others bobbed on the lake, swept away by the churning water.

Conan would wager a good deal that the tunnels far below had finally lost their magic and were now losing their long battle against the weight of the earth. That would put an end to the fire and any air-breathing creatures alive down there, but what of those shadowy water-dwellers? Would they also die with the magic, or live to infest the Lake of Death?

Conan shouted to one fool of a warrior ready to dive into the lake to swim to a fugitive canoe. Then he saw Seyganko striding along the shore, waving men back from the water.

Conan brushed sand and gravel off Valeria and let her do the same for him.

"You're bleeding," she said. "I think there are salves somewhere down there."

"I'm better off bleeding, I think. I'm for staying well away from the water until we've asked Emwaya what happened."

"If she knows."

"You saw her face. Her father told her what he was going to do to... to the Living Wind, I'd wager."

Valeria shuddered. Then her sword was in her hand as a warrior with Kwanyi headdress and Ichiribu tattoos rose slowly from the bushes.

"Wobeku!" Conan and Valeria said together.

The traitor kept his hands in plain sight. "Great chiefs, do with me as you please when you have heard me out. I wish to yield the men under me to the mercy of the Ichiribu and their chiefs. I can also name those underchiefs of the Kwanyi who may listen to talk of peace between our tribes."

Conan and Valeria looked at each other. They knew of the clan rivalries among the Kwanyi. If Chabano was dead, as seemed likely, the Ichiribu might use these rivalries to impose a victor's peace.

"Was it you or Aondo who slew the *bidui* boys?" Valeria asked.

"Aondo."

Somehow to Conan that had the ring of truth.

"This is a matter for Seyganko and Emwaya," he said. "Lie down on your shield so none will put a spear through you until we return. Bid your folk stay out of sight. And pray to the gods that you are telling the truth!"

Wobeku swore several potent oaths with a certain dignity that Conan thought did him some honor, then assumed the pose of submission. "Now we'd best make haste to Seyganko, before someone skewers our would-be peacemaker," the Cimmerian grumbled as he broke into a trot. "And here I thought our work was done!"

"We can't seek out the river until the lake's fit to sail on," Valeria reminded him. "Nor am I one for sitting idle while others work."

"But then—"

She slipped an arm around his waist. "Downriver to the Trading Coast. I've still those fire-stones, and as long as no Golden Serpent comes with them, they may buy us a ship."

"Buy *you* a ship," Conan said. Her touch was as warming to his blood as ever, but he knew too much about the other sides of her nature. "Two of us on one ship would divide the crew. I'm for turning landsman anyway, until the Barachans have forgotten the name of Conan the Cimmerian."

"*They* may forget it," Valeria said with a complacent smile. "*I* will not."