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# Conan and the Emerald Lotus by John Hocking

## Prologue

Ethram-Fal stood in the ancient chamber and looked upon bones. Dark and pitted, they lay strewn in the thick dust of the stone floor. Ruddy torchlight flared, filling the circular room with leaping shadows. A tall soldier in full armor stood motionless beside the single doorway, torch held high in one steady hand.

Ethram-Fal knelt, his gray robes rustling, and pulled an ornate dagger of irregular shape from a concealed sheath. Though he was a young man, the sorcerer's hunched and shrunken form gave the impression of great age. Thin hair of mouse-brown was beginning to grow from a scalp recently shaved clean. He frowned in contemplation, furrowing his bulbous and malformed brow. He probed among the bones and dust with the dagger's tip and felt the slow welling of despair.

*It's dead now, he thought. Of course it's dead now, but I had hoped that there would be something remaining, if only husks.* The dagger tip disturbed the dust of centuries, revealing nothing. Ethram-Fal stood suddenly, and the soldier with the torch flinched.

"Fangs of Set," he cursed. "Have I come so far for nothing?" His voice was a hollow echo. The sorcerer looked up. The ceiling of the circular room was so high that it was lost in the flickering darkness beyond the torchlight's reach. An even band of engraved hieroglyphics ran around the walls at twice the height of a man. The markings seemed to writhe tortuously in the dim light.

"There is no doubt," said Ethram-Fal dully, "this is the room." He turned, and in doing so set his sandal upon something that gave a muffled crack. Stepping to one side, he looked down and went rigid.

"Ath, lower the torch." The soldier dutifully lowered the torch to illuminate the floor while Ethram-Fal knelt again. He had tread upon what appeared to be a human rib and had snapped it in two. A fine black powder seeped out of the broken bone. Ethram-Fal gave a choked cry of triumph.

"Of course! It's gone dormant. It must have absorbed all nourishment down to the marrow and then spored. Set grant that there is still life!" He gestured with a gray-clad arm. "Ath, bring my apprentice."

The soldier left the room, the light of his torch receding down the empty corridor, leaving Ethram-Fal in darkness. But it was not darkness to Ethram-Fal, who saw his future looming bright and glorious before him. His breathing quickened, the only sound in the stony silence.

In a few moments Ath returned, his hawk-like Stygian features stern and impassive. Behind him trailed a slender adolescent boy clad in yellow robes. Though taller than Ethram-Fal, the top of the boy's tousled head came to well below Ath's chin. The boy looked about the room with obvious impatience.

"I was helping the men set up camp in the large chamber," he said petulantly. "Have you finally found something useful for me to do?"

Ethram-Fal did not reply, but fixed his gaze upon the bones at his feet.

"Ath," he said, "kill him."

With a single fluid motion the soldier drew his broadsword, buried it in the youth's belly, twisted it, and withdrew. The apprentice uttered a high-pitched wail, clutched himself, and dropped to lie writhing weakly in the dust. When the boy stopped breathing, Ath wiped his blade upon the body and sheathed it. He looked at Ethram-Fal expectantly. The hand gripping the torch had not faltered.

The sorcerer produced a thick reddish leaf from a leather pouch on his belt. He handed it to Ath, who immediately put it into his mouth. The soldier's eyes closed and his cheeks drew hollow as he sucked upon the

leaf.

Ethram-Fal paid this no heed. Bending at the waist, he gingerly picked up the broken rib between thumb and forefinger. Tilting the bone with exaggerated care, he spilled a thin stream of black powder over the sprawled body of his apprentice. He emptied the macabre vessel, concentrating its contents on the dark stain spreading upon the corpse's midriff. When the dust ceased to fall, he tossed the rib aside and stood staring at the body in silence.

An hour passed, during which Ath chewed and swallowed his leaf and Ethram-Fal moved not at all. Toward the close of the second hour, Ethram-Fal cocked his head, as though he sought to hear a soft sound from a great distance. The body on the floor shuddered and the sorcerer clasped his hands together in an ecstasy of anticipation.

A moist crackling filled the still air. The corpse jerked and trembled as though endowed with tormented life. Ethram-Fal caught his breath as fist-sized swellings erupted all but instantaneously from the dead flesh of his apprentice. The body was grotesquely distorted in a score of places, with such swift violence that the limbs convulsed and the yellow robes ripped open.

Green blossoms the size of a man's open hand burst from the corpse, leaping forth in such profusion that the body was almost hidden from view. Iridescent and six-petaled, the blooms pushed free of enclosing flesh, bobbing and shaking as if in a strong wind. In a moment they were still, and a sharp, musky odor, redolent of both nectar and corruption, rose slowly to fill the chamber.

The peals of Ethram-Fal's laughter reverberated from the stone walls like the tolling of a great bell.

## ***Chapter One***

The night air was warm and close, but it was of polar freshness compared to the dense atmosphere within the tavern. A stout, sturdily built man in the mail of a mercenary of Akkharia shoved open the door and surveyed the scene within. The main room was spacious, but crowded with a motley variety of locals, mercenaries, and travelers. The visitor ran a callused hand through his graying hair and scanned the gathering for the man he'd come to see. In the closest corner a number of men were

throwing dice, alternately crowing in triumph and cursing in defeat. The center of the sawdust-strewn floor was dominated by a huge table bearing the nearly denuded carcass of an entire roasted pig. Men clustered about it, drinking and stuffing themselves.

"Ho, Shamtare!" a voice thundered over the tavern's clamor. There, in the farthest corner, was the man he sought. Shamtare made his way across the floor, dodging gesticulating drunks and busy serving wenches with practiced ease.

The one who had called his name lounged against the tavern's rear wall with his long muscular legs propped up on a table. He was a hulking, powerful-looking man whose skin had been burnt to a dark bronze by ceaseless exposure to the elements. He was clad in a chain-mail shirt and faded breeches of black cotton. At his waist hung a massive broadsword in a worn leather scabbard. A white smile split a face that seemed better suited to scowl, and piercing blue eyes flashed as he hoisted his wine jug in a rakish salute, gesturing for Shamtare to join him. The scarred table-top held a loaf of bread and a joint of beef, as well as heaping platters of fruits, cheese, and nuts. From the crusts and rinds scattered about, it would seem that a celebration of sorts had been going on for some time.

"Conan," said Shamtare, "I thought you said your money was running low."

"So it is," answered the other with a barbarous accent. "What of it? Tomorrow I shall surely be working for one of this cursed city's mercenary troops, and tonight I find that I have missed civilization more than I had realized." The barbarian washed the words down with a great swallow of wine.

Shamtare sat and helped himself to a handful of ripe fruit. "Traveled far, have you?" he asked, popping pomegranate seeds into his mouth.

"Aye, from the heart of Kush across the Stygian deserts. It seems that I'm no longer welcome in the southern kingdoms."

Shamtare raised his thick eyebrows in puzzlement "But surely you are a Northman..."

"A Cimmerian," said Conan. "But I have done much traveling."

"Indeed," murmured Shamtare, to whom Cimmeria was a chill and distant place of myth. "But about your choice of mercenary employment..."

Conan took a bite out of the beef joint and chewed enthusiastically. "Still trying to get me to join your troop?"

Shamtare lifted his hands. "You can't blame me for that. When I saw your performance on the practice field, I knew that you'd be an asset to any troop that signed you on. And you know I'm paid a bounty for each new recruit. I admit that when I asked where you'd be dining tonight, I had more in mind than tipping a jug with you. I say again that Mamluke's Legion could well use a man like yourself."

Conan shrugged, shaking his square-cut black mane. "I've been to see all four troops in this pestilent city, and they all offer the same wages. The king must keep close watch on his mercenary commanders that none of them can outbid the other for an experienced soldier. What in Ymir's name does King Sumuabi need with four troops of sellswords anyway?"

"The king watches over his mercenaries because he has plans for them." Shamtare's voice dropped to hushed, conspiratorial tones. "Rumor has it that Sumuabi may need all four armies very soon."

"Crom, it seems that all you Shemites do is hole up in your little city-states and venture out once a year to try to conquer your neighbor. It is but a larger version of the clan feuds of my homeland. You fight a few battles and then slink back home with nothing gained. And this with Koth hungering at your border."

"True," said Shamtare tolerantly. "But this time it is whispered that we may go to aid a revolt in Anakia. Sumuabi may soon bring it over two cities. If this comes to pass, then the plunder should be rich for even the lowliest foot soldier."

Conan thought on this while Shamtare borrowed the wine jug. "That is good news, yet it still matters little which troop I join."

"Come now, Conan." Shamtare set the empty jug down with a hollow thump. "What do you want of me? I tell you, I'm great friends with the troop's armorer, and I promise you a shirt of the best Akbitanan mail if you sign up with us. The shirt you're wearing looks as though it's been

through hell."

Conan snorted with laughter, looking down at his tarnished mail. Long vertical tears in the mesh had been crudely repaired with inferior links that were beginning to show traces of rust.

"Perhaps not hell itself, but a pig-faced demon from thereabouts. You have a deal, Shamtare."

The Shemite grinned in his beard, opened his mouth to ask a question, and then shut it again. The tavern's door had swung wide, and now two figures entered the room. The foremost was almost as tall as Conan and clearly a warrior. He wore a black-lacquered breastplate over brightly polished steel mail. A black crested helmet was held under one thick arm. Blue-black hair fell in a thick mass over his square shoulders. A wide white scar parted his carefully trimmed beard just to the right of his stern mouth. He looked around the room with an almost-tangible aura of scorn. The crowd in the tavern quieted somewhat at the two men's arrival, but those who stopped to gaze at the newcomers did not study the warrior but his companion.

The man who stood in the dark doorway was also tall, but he was somewhat stooped as though ill or injured. From head to foot he was wrapped in a cowl of lush green velvet. His hands, where they emerged from their sleeves, wore green-velvet gloves. His face was hidden in the shadow beneath his hood.

The strange pair hesitated a moment, then walked quickly through the tavern's crowd, which parted easily before them. They passed through a door into a back room and were lost from view.

"Who the hell was that?" asked Conan, reaching for the jug-

"Someone best left unknown," said Shamtare softly.

"No matter. What's this? No wine? Ho, wench!" Conan brandished the empty jug above his head. "More wine! I'm parched!" Spurred by the barbarian's bellow, a serving girl leapt into action. Hefting a full jug onto one shoulder, she made her way toward Conan's table. Her thin cotton shift, damp with sweat and spilt wine, clung to her shapely torso as she moved. The barbarian grinned broadly, watching her approach with frank admiration. Blushing, she thumped the heavy jug down on the table, her

eyes seeking the floorboards.

"Five coppers, milord," she murmured.

"A silver piece," said Conan. He tossed her the coin, which she snatched from the air with the effortless speed born of long practice. "Keep the change," he added needlessly, for she had already turned away. He caught up the fresh jug as a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder. Conan looked up into the craggy face of the black-armored warrior who had entered. With the man clad in emerald velvet.

"My master would speak with you," rasped the warrior. Conan shrugged off his hand and turned to face Shamtare.. But the chair across the table was empty. Conan noticed that the tavern door was just swinging shut.

"Mitra preserve me from civilized comrades," muttered the barbarian.

"You would be wise to do exactly as my master requests." The warrior towered over the seated Cimmerian, the scar in his beard broadening as his lips tightened in a disapproving grimace. Reflected firelight gleamed upon his lacquered breastplate. Conan took several slow, noisy swallows of wine, pointedly ignoring his unwanted companion, then carefully set the jug down on the table.

"Am I a dog that I come when a stranger calls?"

The warrior started slightly, then drew a deep, audible breath in an obvious effort to control himself. His dark eyes glared into Conan's, blazing with pent fury, then flicked away.

"There is," he bit out through clenched teeth, "... there is gold in it for you. Much gold."

Conan belched, then stood up casually, still grasping the neck of his wine jug. "You should have said so in the first place. Lead on to your master.

The warrior stood still, his expression betraying an indignant rage held in place by will alone; then he turned stiffly and walked toward the door at the tavern's rear. He looked back over one armored shoulder.

"You won't be needing that," he said, pointing to the jug Conan carried.

The Cimmerian took another drink, walking past the warrior. "I just bought it." He put a hand on the heavy door and pushed through.

## ***Chapter Two***

The room beyond the door was long and narrow, dominated by a lengthy rectangular table set with three brass candelabra. All four walls were hung with dark curtains thickly woven with brocade to deaden sound. At the table's far end the man in the green-velvet cowl sat motionless in a high-backed chair. The candle flames danced briefly in the draft from the opened door. Conan strode into the room, stopped at the base of the table, and looked down its length at the man who had summoned him.

"You are Conan of Cimmeria." The voice was strong and masculine, yet possessed a peculiar underlying tremor, as if it took an effort to speak.

"I am," rumbled the barbarian. "And who are you?"

The dark-armored warrior pushed the door closed behind him and stepped up beside the Cimmerian.

"Dog," gritted the bearded warrior, "you are here to answer questions, not to ask them."

"Gulbanda!" The cowed man raised a green-gloved hand and Conan saw that it trembled. "Come stand beside me. I'll make a few indulgences for a simple barbarian." The warrior stalked to his master's side and stood there sullenly, mailed arms crossed over his deep chest.

"Who I am is of little importance to you. It is important only that you know that if you perform a service for me, I shall make you a rich man," said the man in green.

"Why me?"

Hoarse, wheezing laughter came from within the velvet hood. The green man gestured to Gulbanda beside him.

"My bodyguard spotted you coming into Akkharia and recognized you. I have since done some investigating of my own and found that you may



well live up to your distinctive reputation."

"Recognized me?" Conan's blue eyes shifted hotly from one man to the other.

"Some years ago I saw you taken by the City Guard of Shadizar. Men knew you as a great thief." Gulbanda spoke with reluctance, apparently finding even secondhand praise of the Cimmerian distasteful. The man in velvet leaned forward intently, placing both hands flat upon the table.

"It is said that you stole the Eye of Erlik and the Hesharkna Tiara. An old Zamoran thief even told me that you had taken the Heart of the Elephant from Yara's tower in Arenjun."

"That's a lie," said Conan flatly.

"No matter," purred the man in green. "No matter. Let us simply agree that you are a thief among thieves and that I need such a man. I will pay you a hundredfold more for one night's work than you would receive for a full month of selling your sword as a lowly mercenary for King Sumuabi."

Conan dragged a chair away from the table and sat down heavily. He drank from his wine jug and leaned back in the chair.

"What is it that you would have me do?"

The green man produced a rolled scroll of parchment from a sleeve and slid it down the length of the table to Conan, who caught and unrolled it.

"That is a precise map of the mansion of Lady Zelandra. Do you know of her?"

"She is a sorceress seeking position in King Sumuabi's court, is she not?" Conan's tone was skeptical.

"That is true. Since the death of King Sumuabi's court wizard, several pretenders to his position have come forward. Lady Zelandra is among them. Be assured that her skills are greatly overrated."

The barbarian frowned and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Talk of magic set him ill at ease.

"Cimmerian," continued the man in green, "tonight you shall break into

the house of the Lady Zelandra. There you will slay her and steal for me a silver box. The box is the twin of this one."

A delicately chased silver casket, the size of a man's fists held together, was placed upon the table. It gleamed in the yellow candlelight.

"I am told by a most reliable source that Zelandra's box is like my own in every detail. It is vital that you secure this small casket and bring it directly to me. You may take anything else in the mansion that catches your eye. Anything else is yours. The casket will be kept in her inner chambers, probably beside her bed. I must have it."

As he spoke, the man in green's voice grew louder, and his words tumbled urgently over one another. When he stopped, "his breathing was raggedly distinct in the soundproofed room. His gloved, hands twitched where he held them on the table.

Conan drew himself up straight in his chair. A corded forearm slid slowly along its armrest until the Cimmerian's right hand hung idly over the worn hilt of his broadsword.

"For all your studies you seem to know me not at all," Conan said tersely. "I am not an assassin, nor do I make war upon women. Seek another for this task." The green-cowled man flinched as if slapped. Beside him, Gulbanda's features hardened into a mask of rage.

"I will pay," croaked the green man in a strangled voice, "a roomful of gold. You'll never need to work again. You could be a rich man, with the leisure to wench and carouse the rest of your life."

Gulbanda's arms dropped to his sides and Conan's hand fell upon his hilt. A deadly tension coiled in the closed room, poisonous as an adder.

"Seek another for this task," repeated the barbarian.

"You would deny me?" The cowled man's tone fell to a caustic hiss. "So be it. Think you that my investigations halted with your career as a thief? I know well your whereabouts these past few years, Amra! There is no city in Shem that would not gleefully hang the bloodiest pirate of the Western Ocean from a gibbet! You will do as I say or I'll see that you spend your last days in the hands of King Sumuabi's Sabatean torturers!"

Conan's response was an explosive burst of action that sent his chair hurtling back against the door as he sprang forward, toward the two men, his blade whistling from its scabbard. The man in green cried out in wordless shock, falling sideways from his chair even as Gulbanda stepped in to shield him from the infuriated barbarian. The bodyguard's blade came out just as Conan's came down. Steel rang on steel as Gulbanda blocked the heavy broadsword's stroke, staggering under the terrific impact. The warrior had barely time to be astonished at his adversary's strength before he found himself frenziedly fending off a flurry of savage blows. Wielding his massive blade as lightly as if it were a slender rapier, the Cimmerian put the bodyguard on a desperate defensive, driving him back against the curtained wall and holding him there. Gulbanda, trapped in a relentless storm of steel, saw Conan's face go grim with intent and felt a chill lance his bowels. The bodyguard blocked each sledgehammer blow by inches, hoping that the barbarian's strength would falter or that the raging attack would flag, if only for a moment.

Abruptly, his wishes were granted as Conan seemed to overextend himself. A hard horizontal slash glanced from Gulbanda's guard and swung wide, leaving the barbarian's torso open to a thrust. As the bodyguard lunged forward to transfix the Cimmerian on his point, Conan's sword reversed itself with impossible speed. The barbarian's blade struck the hilt and the fist that gripped it, tearing the sword and two fingers from Gulbanda's hand on a flying ribbon of blood. The warrior fell back against the wall with a howl of animal agony, clutching his mangled hand and tangling himself in the drapery. With feline suppleness Conan spun about to face his second foe.

The man in the green cowl stood weaponless beside his chair. His right hand made a sudden throwing motion and something tinkled against the mail over Conan's chest. The barbarian recoiled.

He looked down and saw that there was moisture shining on his breast and broken slivers of glass glittering upon the floor. A wave of dizziness swept through his frame and a sharp, sweet odor filled his nostrils. Conan took a staggering step forward, raising a sword grown almost too heavy to hold. His foe had become an emerald blur.

"Damn you," he whispered through lips gone numb. The earth tilted violently beneath his feet, and he never felt himself hit the floor.

## ***Chapter Three***

Shamtare sat in the corner of a bar he didn't know and drank wine without tasting it. He stared into his chipped ceramic mug, taking no notice of those around him. The mercenary had walked into the first tavern he had found, sat down, and commenced drinking in earnest. Since then his fear had faded, replaced by a searing shame.

Shamtare the Shemite had been a mercenary for almost twenty-five years and feared no combatant who would confront him with muscle and steel. He had seen violence aplenty in more battles than he could remember. But ever since he had watched half his troop swallowed screaming by a black cloud conjured up by a Zuagir shaman, Shamtare had no love of sorcery. It was unnatural, unmanly, and it turned his bones to water.

The mercenary took another deep pull at his wine, feeling a little less than manly himself.

"Ho, white brother." A dark figure sat at his table, pulling up a chair and leaning forward confidentially. Shamtare blinked, setting his cup down. The newcomer was a slim Kushite in the brightly decorated armor of the mercenary company of Atlach the Mace. A thick cluster of fat braids was bound behind his head. Crimson-dyed ostrich feathers were woven into the shoulders of his white cloak.

"Have you looked about yourself, friend?" The black's voice was deep and vaguely amused. "This tavern is frequented by those riding for Atlach the Mace. Do you see anyone from Mamluke's outfit except yourself?"

Shamtare took in his surroundings for the first time. His stomach clenched.

"Indeed," continued his new companion, "do you see anyone of your color at all?" He waited for the Shemite to shake his head in response. "Now, all's the same to me. We fight for the same king, and against the same enemies, yet there are those who see all freelance troops as rivals. In fact, some of the men here are of such a mind. Thus far only your graying hair has kept you from being accosted by these characters. Be wise, white brother, and take your thirst elsewhere."

Shamtare stood, touched his brow in a salute, and headed for the door. The night breeze was cool along the dim street. He walked to the corner and found himself looking for a tall barbarian among the passersby. He

could stand no more. Setting his teeth, Shamtare walked back to the tavern in which he had met Conan the Cimmerian. He thrust thoughts of the green-clad man from his mind as he strode in the door.

The tavern was quieter now, as the dinner hour was past and the greater revels of the evening were yet to commence. The roast pig was gone from its table, and many of the torches had been allowed to burn low. The gamblers in the corner were still busy, but now they wagered in softer, more earnest tones. Shamtare saw no sign of the barbarian. He hailed the barkeep.

"Good evening. Might I have a word with you?"

"If you don't dally about it. I've a tavern to run." The barkeep mopped at his balding pate with a greasy rag. A tattered yellow beard could not obscure his sagging jowls and sour expression.

"There was a tall, black-haired barbarian in here earlier. Did you see him leave?"

"I saw no barbarian. It's bad business to carry tales about customers." The barkeep turned as if to walk away from Shamtare, but the mercenary's hand fell upon his shoulder and arrested his progress.

"A moment more," said Shamtare quietly. "What is that room in the back for?"

"Private parties for paying customers. Take your hand off me."

"Who paid for its use tonight?"

"Take your hand off me, mercenary, or I'll tell my sons to call the city guard." Shamtare's hand dropped away from the barkeep's shoulder and fell upon the hilt of his sword.

"I don't know the man's name," continued the barkeep hastily. "I just know that he has had his way in this part of the city for almost three moons. He is said to be a wizard, and his gold is good. These are reasons enough for me to rent him the room and leave him in peace."

Shamtare turned from the barkeep and made his way to the rear of the tavern. His sword whispered from its sheath as he hit the door to the back

room. He almost tripped over a fallen chair that lay just within. Three brightly lit candelabra were set upon the room's central table. Their warm glow revealed an empty chamber.

Dark blood shone wetly on the carpet, and more spattered the woven curtains. The point of Shamtare's sword lowered to the floor. He made his way quickly across the room, to where the drapes hung awry behind the high-backed chair. A door was concealed there, obscured by the curtains. It swung open at his touch, revealing a black alley, choked with stinking refuse. Shamtare thrust his head into the dark passage, looked about, and swore foully.

"Lose your barbarian friend?" The barkeep had followed him into the chamber. His voice was not unsympathetic. "It wouldn't be the first time that someone had audience with the Green Man and wasn't seen again. I won't even let the serving girls come back here anymore. It is said that the Green Man wishes to become King Sumuabi's new mage and will let nothing stand between himself and his goal. I'm sorry about your friend. A wise man doesn't trifle with sorcery."

"I know that," said Shamtare.

"Come, there is nothing to be done now. Perhaps the Green Man hasn't slain him. I'll buy you a mug of wine."

"Damn." Shamtare sheathed his sword.

"That's better," said the barkeep. "Was the barbarian an old friend of yours?"

"No, a new friend who'll never get to be an old one."

"Forget him, then. His turn today, our turn tomorrow. Come on."

The stout mercenary followed the barkeep from the back room to the bar. He took a seat and accepted the man's offer of a mug of wine. Shamtare recognized the vintage as one of the best out of Ghaza, yet it seemed, at that moment, strangely bitter.

## ***Chapter Four***

The first thing that Conan became aware of was a sultry breeze

smelling of moist earth. He blinked and a vortex of nausea roiled in his guts. He was seated in a heavily built steel chair. Metal bands held his ankles, calves, wrists, and belly tightly in place. Slouched forward, his head hanging, Conan focused his bleary eyes and saw that the chair was bolted to the chamber's glossy marble floor. He had vague memories, little more than disjointed impressions, of being dragged along a noisome alleyway before being tossed bodily into a wagon full of damp straw.

A gust of warm air stirred his hair, and he raised his head with ponderous effort in order to look about. Before him, bronze-bound double doors of glass opened out into the night, revealing a shadowed garden that sloped down and away. Beyond, through a screen of trees, the lights of Akkharia lay spread out like spilled gems on an ebony table. There was no moon, but the stars told him that it was almost midnight.

"Awake, dog?" There were footfalls behind him. It was Gulbanda, his right hand bound in a white bandage. He walked a leisurely circle around the helpless Cimmerian, who silently set all of his strength to testing his bonds. The bodyguard saw the powerful muscles of Conan's arms and legs leap out into ridged relief and laughed humorlessly. His dark eyes flashed in the dim room.

"You cannot break free. Your efforts would be better spent begging me to make your death swift and easy." Gulbanda drew to a halt in front of the barbarian and pulled a dagger from its sheath with great deliberation. Conan relaxed, staring straight ahead in stoic silence. The bared blade made a silvery flourish before the Cimmerian's expressionless face.

"Speak." The dagger came forward until its point indented the skin beneath Conan's right eye. "You have nothing to say?"

Gulbanda moved the blade to the barbarian's forearm and lay the cold steel on bronzed skin. "Why don't you beg your heathen gods for rescue? They might answer if you cried out to them loudly enough."

The razor-sharp edge drew slowly across flesh and a thin scarlet stream broke free in its wake. Conan bared his teeth in a feral snarl, fixing his eyes upon Gulbanda with such elemental hatred that his tormentor withdrew the knife and took an involuntary step backward.

"Gulbanda, you are mistreating our guest." The dagger made a hasty return to its sheath as the warrior retreated to a dark corner of the room.

"I did him no harm," he said in a voice thick with frustration.

"I should hope not," said the man in the green cowl. "He has important work to do tonight." The robed man stood over Conan, inspecting the shallow but painful gash inflicted by his servant. The hood lay in heavy folds about his shoulders, baring his head. He was a black man with sharp, aristocratic features. A high-domed forehead and a strong jaw might have made him handsome, but there was a weathered, weary aspect to his face that belied his obvious youth. The eyes were as rheumy and reddened as those of an old man. The skin of his face appeared to hang on his skull, slack and dull as a mask. Conan noticed a greenish smear beneath his captor's lower lip. Under the barbarian's gaze, he turned away as if ashamed, wiping his mouth on a velvet sleeve.

"You must learn to show restraint, Gulbanda. This man is a valuable tool. If you treat your tools well, they will serve you well." The black man turned back to Conan, pulled a lace handkerchief from his robe, and daubed it gently in the blood on the Cimmerian's forearm. Folding the cloth with care, he replaced it in his pocket. He gazed down at Conan, his eyes dark wells of fathomless emotion.

"I am Shakar the Keshanian. Do you know me?"

"No, but you must be another who seeks to become King Sumuabi's toy mage. What did you do to me?"

"You have some wit for a barbarian. I broke a glass ball upon your breast. The ball was filled with a weak distillate of the Black Lotus. The fumes produce unconsciousness but do no lasting harm. You will feel dizzy and ill for a time, though. I hope that this will not inconvenience you on your mission tonight."

Conan spat at Shakar's feet. "Get your lapdog to run your errands." He jerked his head toward Gulbanda. "I'll not serve you."

Shakar nodded absently, pressing gloved hands together and turning away from his prisoner. He strode to a low chest of drawers set against one of the marble walls.

"The priests of Keshia had little liking for me," he said thoughtfully. "They made my life difficult. So before I left that city I stole much knowledge from them. Much knowledge and several precious items to



make my life outside Keshan easier. The glass balls are one thing I acquired. These are another." Shakar arose from the chest and held his hands out to Conan.

Suspended from each fist was an amulet the size and shape of a hen's egg. They were the color of tarnished brass and inscribed in black with a single serpentine rune. Instead of a chain, each amulet dangled from a flexible loop of thin golden wire. With a quick motion, Shakar flipped one wire noose over the top of Conan's head and released it. The strange pendant fell heavily upon the Cimmerian's breast. The black warlock leaned forward, pulling the barbarian's long hair out from beneath the encircling wire until the metal rested against his flesh.

"There," he murmured. "There." He stroked the amulet lovingly. Then his eyes narrowed, his lips tightened against his teeth, and he bent over to stare Conan full in the face.

*"Hie Vakallar-Ftagn,"* he whispered in a voice like the stirring of dead leaves. Conan went rigid. The wire necklace contracted around his neck until the cold weight of the amulet nestled unpleasantly into the hollow of his throat. A thrill of horror coursed along the barbarian's spine. Shakar stood up straight and grinned in satisfaction. He held the other amulet away from his velvet-clad body.

"Now you shall do as I require, barbarian. You must do it because your life will be forfeit if you do not. This night you will go to the estate of Lady Zelandra, slay her, and steal for me her silver casket. And you shall have it back here by sunrise, thief, or I will speak to your amulet thus."

Held at arm's length, Shakar's remaining pendant swung slowly on its necklace of wire. The man in green stared at it and spoke.

*"Hie Vakallar-Nectos."* His voice died and there was an expectant silence. Then the dangling amulet flared with white incandescence and a sharp sizzling sound filled the room. A wave of heat hit Conan's face like the rush of air from an opened forge. The blaze of light stabbed fiercely at his eyes. For a moment the amulet hung from its wire as a fusing gobbet of nigh-intolerable brilliance; then it fell in a molten stream to spatter brightly on the polished floor. Acrid smoke arose in whorls as the liquid metal gnawed into the marble. It burned out after a long moment, leaving the floor deeply pitted and scarred. A shrill laugh broke from Shakar's lips.

"O Damballah! An ugly way to die, is it not? If you are not back by sunrise, I speak the words. If you attempt to remove the amulet, it will blaze up of its own accord. If you displease me in any way, I shall speak the words. Do you understand?" Mad triumph trembled in the warlock's voice. In the corner, Gulbanda moved uneasily. "Let him loose," Shakar ordered.

"Master?" Gulbanda hesitated and Shakar spun on him in sudden fury, cloak swirling.

"Now, fool!" The warrior hastened to Conan's side and bent to his task. In a moment the barbarian was free of the steel chair, if not of all bonds. He stretched hugely, bending to chafe his legs where the metal cuffs had cut into his flesh.

"Do you know the Street of the Seven Roses?" asked the black sorcerer.

Conan nodded curtly. "It is where they store the shipments of wine in from Kyros."

"That is the warehouse district. Zelandra's mansion is in the residential district at the opposite end of the street. Across the city from the warehouses. It is a respectable area and often patrolled by the city guard."

"It has a very high wall," said Gulbanda coldly. "A smooth one." Conan met the bodyguard's eyes with a gaze as bleak and stark as the blade of a stiletto.

"I want my sword," he said.

Shakar nodded. "Of course. Fetch it, Gulbanda." For a moment the warrior seemed to pause, then he strode quickly from the room. The black mage looked upon Conan and lifted his gloved hands imploringly.

"Do you need to see the map again?"

"No. Do you give me your word that if I bring you the casket, you will remove this thing?" The barbarian touched the amulet about his neck as though it were a sleeping serpent coiled there.

"I swear it. And if it happens that you do not slay the woman, I shall still free you if you bring me the silver box. I must have it. Do you understand?"

The Cimmerian showed his teeth in a mirthless grin. "I understand that well enough."

"Another thing, barbarian, do you know of a Shemite named Eldred the Trader?" Shakar watched Conan intently for a reaction and was visibly disappointed by his reply.

"No. The name means nothing. Another of your rivals seeking position as the king's court wizard?"

"No. It need not concern you." At that moment Gulbanda returned, bearing Conan's sword and scabbard.

He tossed them roughly to the Cimmerian, who snatched them from the air and affixed them to his belt while moving toward the garden window.

"Remember the amulet. Do not fail me," called Shakar, but Conan had already stepped into the night and disappeared.

## ***Chapter Five***

The great wagon lumbered along the Street of the Seven Roses beneath the overarching darkness of a moonless night. Massively spoked wheels ground on the cobblestones as the driver reined his team around a bend. Two huge wooden casks sat ponderously in the wagon's bed, their weight causing the wagon to sag alarmingly. The driver called encouragement to his straining horses and, thus distracted, did not notice the shadow that detached itself from the murk of an alley to furtively sprint across the cobbles and leap up onto the back of the rearmost cask, clinging to it like a cat. The man held himself to the curved surface of the massive barrel with powerful arms as the wagon continued its laborious progress. In the next block a high wall arose on the left side of the street. Seeing it, the man drew himself lithely atop the cask and crouched with his legs drawn up tightly beneath him. He swiftly removed a light leather helmet tucked into his belt at the small of his back and clapped it onto his head.

The wagon swayed, drawing closer to the wall. Its wheels scraped the stone curb and the man jumped, hurling himself into the air with all the strength of his mighty frame. Like a quarrel from a crossbow, the man shot up and against the wall. His body met it with bruising impact, hands clapping against the cold stone with the fingertips alone finding purchase

and digging in atop the wall. He dangled, breath hissing between clenched teeth. Then he chinned himself, threw over a muscular leg and pulled himself up so that he was lying along the top of the wall. He lay motionless for a moment, waiting for the surging vertigo to pass. It seemed that Shakar's Keshanian drug had not entirely left him. He shook his head like a troubled lion, trying to rid himself of the persistent dizziness and see into the darkness below.

An elaborate garden lay spread out in the shadows beneath him. Dim, tangled outlines of trees and undergrowth led up a gentle, landscaped slope to an expansive villa that loomed as an unlit and angular silhouette against the stars. The perfume of night-blooming flowers floated on the slow breeze.

Conan stood on the narrow top of the wall. Heedless of the height, he ran swiftly along it to where a tall tree thrust leafy branches toward the wall. He squatted, peering intently into the tree, then leapt abruptly from his perch, dropping down and forward to capture a sturdy limb in iron fingers. Leaves shook and rustled as the branch bent and then rebounded, holding his weight. The Cimmerian glanced down, then released the limb. He dropped, hit the ground, and rolled in the dewy grass. Conan came to his feet in a fighting crouch, hand on hilt and eyes raking the darkness for sign of a foe.

He was alone on a well-trimmed greensward. In front of him two dense clumps of shrubbery framed a white gravel path that shone dully in the starlight. The path wound up the hill toward the dark mass of Lady Zelandra's mansion. The barbarian moved parallel with the trail, skulking in the shadows as silently as a prowling wolf. Skirting a tiled courtyard adjacent to the manse, Conan approached a darkened window and froze in mid-stride.

Footfalls rattled gravel along the path. Conan ducked into the shadow of a manicured hedge, hand once again gripping his hilt. Two uniformed men walked into view along the trail. They conversed softly, voices carrying on the night air. The Cimmerian crouched motionless as the pair came to a halt not ten paces away. The men wore light armor with short swords belted at the waist, and the larger of the two bore a long, barbed pike on one shoulder. Conan's body tensed, preparing for instant violence. The pike bearer produced a wineskin from beneath his cloak, drank deeply and passed it to his companion. The other took a swallow

and returned the skin, clapping his comrade on the back with crude good humor. The pair continued down the path, blithely unaware of how close they had stood to death.

Conan relaxed, once again feeling a slight stirring of vertigo. He cursed vehemently under his breath until it passed, calling down a plague upon all dabblers in the dark arts. Then he stole silently across the grass to the waiting window. The stout shutters were thrown wide to allow the cool air of evening to ease the day's accumulated heat.

There were bars, but they were slender. Inevitably there was some noise, but Conan worked slowly and with great deliberation, bending the bars rather than tearing them from their settings. Soon he had a space wide enough to squeeze through. With a last look behind, he pulled himself through the window and into the mansion of Lady Zelandra.

He dropped into a long hall lit by a single taper. The floor was thickly carpeted, and rich Vendhyan tapestries graced the walls. The faint odor of sandalwood hung on the still air. Silence lay over the house in a heavy shroud.

Recalling the map that Shakar had shown him, Conan took his bearings and then paced soundlessly down the dim hall. He drew his sword, and the taper's soft light glimmered liquidly along its burnished length. Ahead, the corridor turned right. At the corner a short pedestal held an elegantly fluted vase of Khitan porcelain. Conan rounded the corner and stared down a wood-paneled hall that stretched into the heart of the manse. Another lonely taper lit the corridor with a diffuse amber glow.

A woman stood stiffly in the hallway, looking at him.

"Hush!" Conan lowered his sword and lifted a finger to his lips. "I mean you no—"

The woman quickly reached a hand behind her dark nimbus of hair, then whipped the hand forward with all the strength of her arm and shoulders. A dagger shot toward Conan as swiftly and directly as a hurled dart.

"Crom!" The barbarian twisted his upper body so that the blade nicked his flapping sleeve in passing rather than burying itself between his ribs. The dagger sank almost half its length into the wooden wall five paces

behind him.

Conan lunged forward, covering the distance between himself and the woman in two great bounds. An outstretched forearm struck her across the collarbone, knocking her from her feet and sending her sprawling gracelessly on her back. The Cimmerian's sword made a short, blurred arc that stopped a hairsbreadth from her exposed neck. Cold, sharpened steel lay upon her pulsing throat.

"Hush," said Conan grimly.

"Miserable thief!" hissed the woman. "Damned assassin! Kill me and be done with it!"

The barbarian raised his brows. Here was a beautiful woman. And unafraid. Her thick hair spilled upon the carpet, an ebony cloud surrounding a fine-boned face now sneering in defiance. Her pale eyes shone in the gloom like polished opals.

"I have no wish to harm you or anyone else in this house." Conan stepped back, keeping his sword leveled at the prone woman, but removing it from her throat. She sat up, twisting full lips with disdain.

"You're mad, then."

"No. I am not here of my own choosing. My life is in the balance. If you will aid me, I will be swiftly gone." Conan's hand went to the eldritch amulet wired at his throat. The dark-haired woman drew long legs up beneath her and regarded him steadily.

"I should scream. I am not afraid to die."

"Then why are you whispering?"

She was silent a moment.

"What is it that you seek?" she asked suddenly, her voice slightly louder and more animated than before. "Are you alone? How can I help you?" Her gaze flickered from Conan's face to a point somewhere over his right shoulder. From behind him came the almost inaudible creaking of a floorboard.

Conan spun about and received a blow to the head so savage that it tore off his helmet and sent him reeling blindly across the hall. His shoulder hit the wall with a crash that seemed to shake the building. Stinging blood sluiced hotly into his left eye. Snarling, the barbarian lashed his sword to the left and right, but the blade met no resistance. He blinked, shaking the blood from his face.

Across the hall stood a giant of a man, naked to the waist. The taper's light gleamed upon his skin, casting yellow highlights over heavy arms and a wide, hairless chest that descended into a broad, firm paunch. The man's head was shaved and his features were those of a pure-blooded KM tan. In his hands was a short wooden club, its head adorned with iron studs. The man was silent, but he brandished the club with casual purpose, slanted eyes glittering coldly.

Conan struck with furious speed, taking the offensive with such suddenness that the giant Khitan was nearly impaled upon his sword. With an agile twist of his brawny body, the Khitan battered the barbarian's blade aside so that it scraped its length along the wooden bludgeon, throwing splinters. Unable to halt his headlong thrust, Conan's body slammed into that of his foe. They grappled, and the Khitan sought to seize his sword arm. With an explosive grunt, Conan tore free of the powerful grip and drove his mallet-like left fist home against the side of his enemy's face. Despite the unexpectedness of the move, the Khitan managed to react, attempting to roll with the blow. If he had not, it might well have broken his neck. Even the reduced impact drove him to one knee and started blood streaming from his lips.

As the Cimmerian's sword shot up for the death stroke, a tremendous blow struck the back of his skull. Vision ablaze with flying yellow sparks, Conan went down, his blade thumping on the carpet. In an exhibition of almost superhuman vitality, the barbarian writhed painfully onto his back. Through a thickening haze he saw the dark-haired woman, gaping at him, clutching a sturdy chair. Two of its legs were splintered stumps. The stinging sweet taste of Shakar's potion crept into the back of his throat like bile. Conan tried to rise and felt a sick vertigo, a drugged dizziness that rose from within to smother him in cloying darkness. He reached for his sword, put his hand on the hilt, and passed out.

## ***Chapter Six***

There was stale straw in his mouth. The floor where he lay was strewn

with the mildewed stuff. With effort, Conan spat, pushed himself into a sitting position, spat again, and leaned back against a dank stone wall. Though his head throbbed like a blacksmith's anvil, he put his hands first to his throat.

Shakar's lethal amulet was still in place, still promising searing, lingering death. Conan probed his battered skull with tentative fingers. Drying blood matted his hair over two conspicuously swollen lumps. He pressed his fingertips around them and winced, but found no evidence of serious damage. Satisfied, he cast his eyes about his prison.

It was a narrow, windowless slot of a cell, a little longer than the prone body of a tall man and barely wide enough for two men to stand abreast. The door was a heavily barred iron grate, scaled with flakes of red rust.

Conan wondered how long he had until morning. A hollowness opened deep in his belly. To be incinerated by magic while locked in a cage like a helpless animal was no way for a warrior to die.

He saw that the iron bars of the grate were far too thick for bending and that the hinges were set too deeply in stone to be wrenched free. The barbarian rose slowly to his feet, staring at the bars and clenching his fists until the tendons stood out across the backs of his hands. Conan's will for freedom was as elemental as that of a penned wolf. No matter if it would avail him nothing, he would tear at the bars of his prison until the amulet burnt through his throat.

The Cimmerian's nostrils flared as he stepped to the door of his prison, peering through the holes in the encrusted grate into the dimness beyond.

"Who's there?" he growled.

Scarcely visible in the darkened corridor outside his cell was the lissome figure of the woman he had encountered in the halls of the mansion above. She shrank away from the grate, one pale hand at her throat.

"How did you know I was here?" she stammered.

"You wear a scent in your hair. It is out of place in this pit."

The woman fumbled awkwardly at her belt for a moment, then there



was a bright spark of flint on steel. A small, golden flame began guttering from an oil lamp that she thrust forward with one hand.

"What is your name?" she asked in a stronger voice.

"Conan," he replied.

The mellow light revealed the woman in full, her skin gleaming dusky ivory. Dark leggings clung to shapely legs.

A simple brown tunic was belted tightly around her trim waist and fell open at her throat.

"Let me out," rumbled the Cimmerian. In spite of the situation, his eyes were drawn to her beauty, captured by the loose fall of her lush black hair and the elegant oval of her face.

"A curious name." Her gaze seemed to pierce the cell's iron door, moving over the Cimmerian with a restless curiosity.

"If you do not set me free before dawn, it will be the name of a dead man," Conan said.

"Then you have a few hours of life remaining. Who are you, thief?" The barbarian heaved an exasperated sigh and gripped the bars of his prison with both hands.

"I am Conan, a Cimmerian."

"What kind of a thief breaks into the home of an accomplished sorceress and yet scruples to kill one who discovers him therein?" The tiny flame of the oil lamp was mirrored in her eyes.

"Listen to me, woman. This amulet around my neck was placed there by Shakar the Keshanian. He charged me with breaking into this house and stealing a small silver chest. If I do not return with the chest by sunrise, his amulet will slay me with hellfire. Set me free and I swear by Crom to do nothing to harm anyone in this house. I will return to Shakar without your silver box and seek to persuade him to remove the amulet at sword's point."

The woman's brow furrowed with interest and skepticism. She held the

oil lamp aloft to better study Shakar's amulet, while Conan, dappled by the grate's shadow, stared back intently and awaited a response.

"Silver box," she murmured. "And what does Shakar the Keshanian want with milady's silver box?"

"Hanuman devour all silver boxes!" exploded the Cimmerian. "I neither know nor care what mad designs the Keshanian has upon Zelandra's belongings. I only know that the bastard's sorcerous toy will spell my death unless I can make him take it off. Set me free! Did I not spare you when you lay at my feet with a blade at your throat?"

The woman was silent, staring at him expressionlessly through the iron door. Conan wondered how long she had been standing outside his cell before he noticed her.

The woman reached a hand behind her head and pulled a throwing dagger from its sheath at her nape. She hefted it, flipping the knife in a glittering pinwheel and catching it again by the hilt.

"I am Neesa, scribe and bodyguard to Lady Zelandra. I can throw this dagger with some skill."

"I am well aware of that," growled Conan, feeling the faint stirring of hope.

"Heng Shih wanted to keep you shut up until the morning so as not to disturb milady. But I am of a mind to take you to Lady Zelandra and have you tell her your story. Do you swear by your gods that you will neither attempt to harm me nor escape if I free you from the cell?"

"You have the word of a Cimmerian."

Replacing the throwing dagger in its sheath, Neesa turned and pulled a stout set of manacles from a peg on the wall behind her. She pushed them through a hole in the grate, and Conan received them without comment. The manacles were of oiled steel and separated by a mere three links of heavy chain. The Cimmerian closed the manacles about his thick wrists one at a time. Each fastened with a metallic snap that rang disproportionately loud in the narrow stone cell. When he looked up, his gaze locked with the woman's for a long moment.

What Neesa saw in the barbarian's eyes she could not name, but she produced a jingling ring of keys from another wall peg. The key turned in the lock with a rust-choked rasp and the door swung wide, keening in protest. The hulking Cimmerian paused briefly in the open stone portal, then stepped free into the corridor. Neesa felt a surge of fear that dissipated when she saw Conan's face. He was grinning broadly.

"Lead on," he said. "By Crom, it's good to see I still have some luck left this ill-favored night."

## ***Chapter Seven***

Shakar the Keshanian paced restlessly within the vaulted marble walls of his bedchamber from the side of his canopied bed, laden with silks and exotic furs, across the exposed marble floor, to a circular table of carved and polished oak. The tabletop was bare except for a small, intricately chased silver cask that sat alone at its center. The black sorcerer halted before the table, staring fixedly at the box. This time he could not wrench himself away to continue his nervous pacing. Instead, he extended a gloveless hand, webbed with veins as prominent as those of a man twice his age, and laid it reverently upon the lid of the silver casket. A trembling coursed through his body as he opened the box. The inner lining of the cask was seamless and polished to a mirror surface. In one corner was a small pile of powder as deeply green as the needles of a northern pine. Beside it lay a tiny silver spoon of the kind used to feed infants. Shakar gazed hungrily at the emerald powder, his lips drawing back from yellowed teeth set in receding gums.

"So little left," he breathed. He snapped the box's lid shut with a convulsive movement and turned forcibly away to resume his pacing. He reached the bed and turned, robes hissing on the smooth floor, and felt his resolve crumble. The silver box on the table drew him forward until he found himself standing over it, opening the lid and seizing the spoon in a desperately eager hand.

At that moment, just beyond the circular table, a silent ripple of roseate light danced across the naked wall. Shakar stiffened, fearful that his craving for the emerald dust had addled his mind. Slow streams of multicolored light were running fluidly over the wall of his bedchamber. As he watched, they began lacing themselves together, weaving their glowing fabric into a luminous haze. Soon a rainbow-hued expanse of churning fog covered the full breadth of the wall. Shakar watched in mute

astonishment as the colors dimmed, giving way to a brilliant white light. The dark silhouette of a man solidified there, suspended motionless in the pale blaze of phosphorescent mist. The head, as dark and featureless as a shadow, turned toward Shakar and regarded him.

"Sweet Set!" The black sorcerer took a faltering step backward, bringing a spoonful of the green powder to his open mouth and thrusting it beneath his tongue. His body jerked as though struck by a heavy blow, and the spoon dropped to jingle merrily on the marble floor. An incoherent cry of rage burst from his lips and resounded in the still room. Savage strength radiated through his wasted limbs, and his face lit with an unholy glee.

"Invade my chambers and die, fool!" howled Shakar, spittle flying from his lips. His hands described a swift sequence of complex signs in the air before him. At their conclusion, his left hand shot up and twisted into a crooked talon. He extended it toward the figure floating in its luminous cloud and barked a series of guttural syllables, words in a language that was ancient before the oceans drank Atlantis.

An ethereal ring of rolling darkness solidified around his left wrist. Sharp pinpoints of white light winked in the black coil and a bone-numbing chill radiated from it, turning Shakar's panting breath into plumes of steam. The Keshanian's hand drew back and then lashed forward, casting the black ring as a man might throw a stone. It moved toward the suspended silhouette with easy speed.

The figure lazily raised a shadow-hand amid the bright vapor. The dark coil hit the outstretched hand and shredded into fading black streamers.

Shakar gasped aloud. The invader had just shrugged off the most lethal death-spell in his repertoire. A flat, metallic laugh emanated from the suspended silhouette and a sourceless light shone upon the featureless mask of darkness. A face was revealed, and it was a face that Shakar the Keshanian knew well.

"Eldred!" cried the man in green. "Why do you torment me?" He fell to his knees on the hard floor, hands held out in shaking supplication. "I must have more of the Lotus! Anything I have is yours! What do you want of me? What must I do? Eldred?"

The fog of light upon the wall began to draw in upon itself, fading at its

edges, hiding the dark figure from view.

Shakar's voice rose in frantic despair. "Eldred! Don't leave me!" But the sorcerous projection shrank and thinned until it was merely a few stray wisps of dispersing vapor.

Then he was facing a blank marble wall. Hot tears rose in the black warlock's eyes, spilling down his haggard cheeks despite his best efforts to contain them.

There was someone at his door.

"Master! Master, what troubles you?" Gulbanda's voice came muffled through the door's heavy panels. "Are you unwell?" Shakar stood unsteadily, drawing a velvet sleeve across his face.

"Enter, Gulbanda. All is well. I had... an ill dream." He faced away from the door as it opened, admitting the bearded bodyguard, who looked quizzically around the bedchamber. Gulbanda's eyes narrowed as they fell upon the open silver box. Shakar composed his features, but did not turn to look upon his servant. He cleared his throat.

"Has the Cimmerian returned?"

"No, master. I would notify you at once. There are but four hours until dawn."

"The barbarian may still succeed. He does not seem to be a man easily thwarted. Still, go to the house of Lady Zelandra and keep watch over the gates. He may need your assistance in escaping. Go now."

Gulbanda grimaced in disapproval, his scar making a pallid flash in his black beard, but nodded obediently. The dark-armored bodyguard stepped out of the room, then hesitated in drawing the door closed.

"Master, if he returns without the cask, or even with it, may I have him? It will be months before I can wield a sword with any skill. It seems a small favor to grant to one as loyal as I."

"If he does not return, I shall slay him with my amulet.

If he does return to this house, then he is yours, faithful Gulbanda."

The bodyguard grinned with clear pleasure. "Thank you, master. I would have him in the chair again, repenting that he ever took my fingers."

"Good evening, Gulbanda."

The door closed, leaving Shakar alone in his bedchamber. He walked slowly to his bed and sat, his body weighted with a weariness that left his mind free and ablaze with urgent energy. He considered trying to sleep, or at least lying down to rest for a while, but he didn't move. Shakar simply sat on the edge of the bed with trembling hands clutched tight in his lap. He tried to fix his black eyes on the floor between his feet, but again and again his gaze rose helplessly to fasten upon the open silver cask.

## ***Chapter Eight***

Conan followed Neesa out of the little dungeon, through a cobwebbed wine cellar and up a worn flight of stone stairs. They made their way silently down taper-lit corridors until they stood before a broad double door inlaid with plaques of carved ivory. Neesa laid a slim hand upon the heavy door and turned to the barbarian.

"Milady is likely awake, but if she still sleeps, you must be silent and allow me to wake her. If startled from sleep she might smite us with some spell." Conan's face went dour and he stroked lightly at Shakar's amulet with one hand.

"By Manannan, it seems the more I strive to avoid sorcery, the more it strives to seek me out," he grumbled. "Lead on."

The doors swung open soundlessly at Neesa's touch, revealing an ornate, painted screen that shielded from view the unlit room beyond. Neesa took a tentative step within and the darkness was abruptly split by a flicker of weird crimson light. The two halted on the threshold as the room was suddenly aglow with a rainbow of brilliant colors. A soft feminine cry, half dismay and half astonishment, came out of the dark. Hearing it, Conan and Neesa lunged together around the screen and into Lady Zelandra's chamber, where they stopped short in amazement.

Vaporous light coruscated along the wall, illuminating the room with a shifting radiance. A luxurious bed stood against the left wall, flanked by massive shelves crammed with books. Tables were set on either side of the

bed, and they too were heaped with books. A woman was sitting bolt-upright in the bed, half wrapped in a white froth of silken sheets. She stared at the wall across from her, where foggy strands of many-hued light were interlocking in a grid of translucent fire. The colors died and the wall became a sheet of phosphorescent mist. An ominous shadow coalesced there.

Conan's instinctive fear of the supernatural seized him in a frigid fist, lifting the hair on the nape of his neck.

"Heng Shih!" screamed the woman in the bed. "Heng Shih!"

A door on the opposite side of the chamber burst open and a man charged through, sliding to a stop beside the bed. It was the huge Khitan whom Conan had fought in the corridor. In his left hand was the wooden mace; in his right was a heavy scimitar, its flaring blade reflecting the sinister light that bathed the room. Holding both weapons before him, the Khitan advanced expressionlessly upon the black shadow suspended in light.

"Hold!" cried the woman. "Don't touch him, Heng Shih." The Khitan stopped his advance but moved sideways to put himself between the sorcerous projection and the woman in the bed.

"Oh, Lady Zelandra. You prove that your wisdom is the equal of your beauty." The voice was deep and resonant. It was not loud, yet seemed to reach into every corner of the room. Conan recoiled, his wilderness-bred senses assuring him that what he seemed to hear was not sound at all. It came from no discernible direction. The black figure spoke directly into the mind.

"Who are you? Why do you trespass here?" The woman in the bed seemed more enraged than afraid. The invader, etched starkly against shifting veils of white light, laughed and spoke again.

"You know me as Eldred the Trader."

The woman bristled, coming to her knees on the bed.

"Assassin! Have you come here to gloat over my impending death?" she spat.

"On the contrary, sweet lady, I have come to offer you life. I am the master of the Emerald Lotus. You have tasted its glorious power and felt its mortal demands. I am fresh from a visit to the home of Shakar the Keshanian, and I fear that he will not last another two days. His appetite escalates as his supply dwindles. You seem to be in much better health, so I infer that you have shown greater control than the Keshanian. You may live another week or two, but be aware that without a steady supply of my lotus, you are doomed."

"You have a price?" asked Zelandra bitterly. The shadow figure continued as though she had not spoken.

"The Emerald Lotus is a wondrous gift to sorcerers. You have experienced but a meager fraction of its strength in your own wizardry. Its power is limitless. With enough of the lotus a mage might become all-powerful, while those seduced by it and then abandoned must die. In the guise of Eldred the Trader, I approached both you and Shakar the Keshanian. Two petty sorcerers locked in a trifling rivalry over which would be privileged to become King Sumuabi's lackey. The lure of the mythical Emerald Lotus proved as strong as I knew it would be. I sold it to you for a pittance, but I would have given it to you for nothing had you chosen not to buy."

"Why?" The rage had faded from Zelandra's voice, leaving only a profound weariness.

"Why?" The veils of stark light throbbed brighter. "Because I wondered how much power such a small amount would grant you. Because I wondered how long you could make it last. But most of all, because I wondered how long it would take you to die once it was gone. I have learned so much from you, sweet lady, and from Shakar the Keshanian. It is knowledge I shall use to good effect. I have found the seeds of the Emerald Lotus, lost since the time of black Acheron, and I am its master. It shall strengthen me and slay my enemies. All the mages of Stygia shall soon have the opportunity to sample my lotus, and those who accept it will either obey me as loyal followers or be left to die. Can you not see it, sweet lady? I will command a legion of lotus-enslaved wizards, while that which holds them in bondage grants me greater and greater power. Who can say what the limits of my dominion might be?" The ebon outline fell silent, pausing as though to savor the moment. "I am destined to become a great force in the world, Zelandra, but you need not fear me. I am not here to



slay you; rather I would ask you, lady, would you share this power with me?"

"Who are you?" The woman on the bed spoke without emotion.

The moving curtains of fiery mist drew apart, dimming into the background as the figure became visible: a tall man dressed in a regal gray robe trimmed with ermine. Great dark eyes set in a noble, sharp-featured face surveyed the room with calm intensity. A subtle, golden radiance played about him as he bowed deeply toward the Lady Zelandra.

"I am called Ethram-Fal."

"Ethram-Fal?" Zelandra's voice cracked. "I have heard of you, Stygian. A reject of the Black Ring. Why do you present yourself as a normal man rather than the twisted dwarf that you are?"

"Bitch!" The invader all but choked in astonishment. "I offer you life and a place by my side and you would mock me?" The sorcerer's words burst inside their skulls with staggering force, scalding with shock and rage. The figure fell in upon itself, its outline collapsing into the image of a much smaller, hunched man in plain gray robes. Bulging eyes glared furiously from beneath a dark and beetle brow. The haze of light around him paled and then vanished entirely, revealing a rocky desert landscape touched by the first pallid rays of dawn. Sharp spires of ruddy stone rose to his immediate left, while on his right a small, unusually regular formation of jagged peaks lay upon the azure horizon. Ethram-Fal's clenched fists shook by his sides while his thin mouth worked in an uncontrollable fury of outrage.

"I will return to you in three days. By then my lotus will have tightened its grip. I swear by the Crawling Chaos that I shall hear you beg for my acceptance. And then, by Set, then *I* shall decide if *you* are worthy!"

The image winked out like a snuffed candle, leaving the four of them staring at a blank wall in a room gone suddenly dark.

## ***Chapter Nine***

The Lady Zelandra fell back among her pillows as if in a faint, then sat up abruptly, twisting one hand in the air. Four torches set in wall mounts flared into brilliant orange flame, flooding the room with light. She was

still staring at the wall.

"Damn him," she said softly, "and damn me for a fool."

"Milady," cried Neesa as she crossed the bedchamber, towing Conan by one muscular arm. Heng Shih, the Khitan, brandished both of his weapons, the flare-bladed scimitar whistling as it cut the air. He did not speak.

"What's this?" Lady Zelandra swung her fine long legs over the bedclothes and came to her feet. She advanced upon the Cimmerian, her eyes slitted and mouth tight with contempt.

"Milady," said Neesa, "this is Conan. He broke into the house, and Heng Shih and I just managed to overcome him. He has an interesting story to tell. He is—"

"A pawn of Shakar's," cut in Zelandra. "The Keshanian amulet about his neck reveals the truth. Is that third-rate trickster so desperate that he sends barbarian thieves to rob me? What did you come seeking, oaf?"

Zelandra's hair was black, straight, and shot through with silver. Though she was well into middle age, her body was still erect and firm, beautiful in her silken nightrobe. Her keen black eyes inspected her uninvited visitor with obvious repugnance.

"I am no friend of Shakar's, lady. If you know the amulet, then you must know its purpose. If I do not return to the Keshanian by dawn, its flame will burn my head from my shoulders. Shakar sent me here to steal from you a silver box. I had no choice in the matter."

"Of course," muttered Zelandra as if speaking to herself, "without more lotus the rascal dies."

"With this damned amulet around my neck, I die in any case." Conan's voice grew louder. "Release me so that I may at least try to force the dog to remove it. Swear to give me that chance, and I shall help you against the Stygian who calls himself Ethram-Fal."

"Derketo, but you have gall," Zelandra grinned briefly in reluctant admiration. "And how might an unwashed savage like yourself be of assistance in a war of wizards?"

Conan tossed his black mane with manifest impatience. "The sorcerer who made himself appear upon the wall, the one who claimed mastery over the thing he called the Emerald Lotus, I know where he is to be found."

Heng Shih slid the scimitar into his wide yellow sash, then fluttered the fingers of his right hand as though drawing quick pictures in the air. Conan recognized the movements as a form of sign language, but had no notion of what message was conveyed.

"Perhaps," said Zelandra soberly, "but who can say?"

She took two swift steps to the Cimmerian's side and laid a cool hand upon his amulet and throat. Conan clenched his teeth. Expecting the thing to blaze into murderous life, he fought an impulse to shrink away.

"*Hie Nostratos-Valkallar*," she whispered, as her fingers slid between the egg-shaped amulet and Conan's throat. The muscles of the barbarian's frame locked into taut knots, but he held himself in place. The sorceress smiled lazily into Conan's tense face and spoke: "*Hie Nostratos-Nectos*."

White fire erupted before the Cimmerian's eyes as Zelandra jerked the amulet free. She stepped back, her hand full of livid molten brilliance. The barbarian clasped both hands around his naked throat as a thick wave of searing heat struck his body.

"Crom and Ishtar!" The curse ripped from Conan's lips.

The sorceress opened her hand and liquid metal streamed down her fingers in bright rivulets, spilling to the floor. It seemed to flee her fingers, every drop shedding itself to sizzle in the carpet. Her hand was unmarked.

"Just a toy," she said. "Now where is Ethram-Fal, and how do you come by such convenient information? If you are lying, I shall devise a death for you that will make the amulet seem most merciful."

"To hell with you and your threats," snarled Conan. "I've been drugged, beaten, and blackmailed all night long. I said I knew where he was and I meant it. I could use a drink."

Heng Shih advanced menacingly, hefting his wooden mace. Conan stood his ground, glaring, and Neesa spoke up.

"I'll get some wine, milady. With your permission?"

"Certainly," said Zelandra, the reluctant smile playing about her lips again. "Being drugged, blackmailed, and beaten does sound like thirsty work."

Neesa bolted from the room, leaving Conan and Heng Shih to glower at one another while Zelandra examined the barbarian as though seeing him clearly for the first time.

"The Khitan is mute, then?" asked Conan, relaxing a little.

"Yes, though his hands and his weapons speak most eloquently when he wishes."

Conan rubbed the back of his head ruefully. "His club spoke to my skull earlier this evening, though I'll wager that if I had not felt the lingering fumes of Shakar's drugs, I would have heard him stealing up behind me." Heng Shih's round face split in a wolfish grin, the fingers of his right hand working in the air before him.

"He says that you have the hardest head of any man he's ever met," said Zelandra wryly.

"Others have said the same," replied the Cimmerian. "Tell him that he's the fastest-moving fat man I've ever seen."

The Khitan frowned darkly, drawing himself up to his full height as Neesa re-entered the room bearing a silver tray set with a jug of wine and a large pewter tankard.

"He understands you perfectly," said Lady Zelandra.

"So I thought." Conan snatched the jug from the platter with manacled hands and tore the cork out with his teeth. Disdaining the tankard, he drank directly from the bottle, taking several deep swallows before pulling it from his lips with an explosive sigh of satisfaction. He strode to the nearest table and, carelessly pushing books aside, sat on its edge. Nursing the bottle, he stretched his long legs out before him and gave every sign of being well pleased with himself.

"As soon as you are adequately refreshed, perhaps you would see fit to

tell us where you believe Ethram-Fal can be found," said Zelandra sarcastically. Heng Shih drew his scimitar casually from his sash and absently began to test its edge with a thumb. None of this served to hurry Conan, who took a last, leisurely swallow from the bottle and set it on the table beside him.

"After you taunted the Stygian and he took on his true aspect, the scenery behind him became as clear as if we looked through a window of glass into a desert," said the Cimmerian.

"I angered him and his concentration faltered," said Lady Zelandra. "What of it?"

"When the desert was revealed," went on Conan patiently, "I saw a ridge behind him. It is a row of small peaks that men call the Dragon's Spine."

"You have seen this ridge before?" asked Neesa in amazement.

"I have seen it twice. The last time was two months ago, when I took a caravan across Stygia from the Black Kingdoms. Before that, I saw it on the way to the dead city of demons called Pteion."

"You have been to Pteion?" Zelandra's eyes were wide in the torchlight.

"I was there once," replied Conan. "It is a place best avoided. Ethram-Fal is in eastern Stygia, a few days' travel from the Shemitish border. From the position of the Dragon's Spine, he is both west and south of Pteion, though what he is doing in that godforsaken wasteland only Crom knows. I give you my word that all I have said is true. Now, if you will remove these manacles, and give me back my sword, I will return to the house of Shakar the Keshanian. After my visit, I promise that he shall trouble neither you nor anyone else unless it be in hell."

At a gesture from Zelandra, Neesa came forward, drawing from within her tunic a small key which she fitted into the Cimmerian's manacles. In a moment they fell from his wrists, clattering to the floor.

"Barbarian..." said Zelandra. She hesitated, a rosy tint suffusing her features, then began again: "Conan, that area of Stygia is little known. I have scant time to find a reliable guide. If you lead me into that territory, your reward will be rich."

"But, milady," burst out Neesa in dismay. Zelandra silenced her with an imperious wave of a hand.

"What else is there for me?" she snapped. "Do I sit here passively and wait for madness and death? Or perhaps you would have me submit myself to Ethram-Fal?"

"No, milady," murmured Neesa, lowering her gaze. Heng Shih folded his thick arms impassively; only his bleak eyes revealed his emotion.

"Besides, Conan," Zelandra continued, "Shakar will die shortly for want of the Emerald Lotus. Slaying him would be an act of mercy. I need your aid now and can pay well for it."

The Cimmerian scowled, his blue eyes burning with distrust.

"I have little use for wizards—" he began, but Zelandra cut him off.

"Conan, I swear by Ishtar and Ashtoreth to do you no harm by sorcery or otherwise. Can you not see that my life is in the balance now? Without your aid, Ethram-Fal will claim my life with his lotus just as surely as Shakar would have claimed yours with his amulet. On the journey you could be guide and guard in one; but when we find his sanctuary, I shall confront Ethram-Fal alone. You needn't deal with him at all..." A note of pleading desperation had crept into her voice. Conan shifted in discomfort and suddenly felt Neesa's body pressed warmly against his side. In front of him, Lady Zelandra extended a hand in supplication more eloquent than words.

"Please, barbarian."

"What the hell," said Conan gruffly. "I trust that the wages will outstrip those of a mercenary."

"Tenfold," said Zelandra. "By Pteor, Conan, you shall never have reason to regret this." The Cimmerian felt Neesa remove herself from his side. At the same moment he noticed Heng Shih's face had taken on the expression of a man attempting to swallow a mouthful of spoiled meat.

"I'm damned if I don't regret it already," he grumbled. "When do we leave?"

"After sunrise." Zelandra spun about in a swirl of her silken robe. 'I have many preparations to make, and you could doubtless use a little sleep after a night like this. Heng Shih, show our guest to one of the bedchambers."

The big Khitan thrust his scimitar once more through his sash and brusquely beckoned the Cimmerian to follow him. Neesa slipped out the door just ahead of them, not glancing at Conan, but heading off down the hallway in the direction opposite that taken by Heng Shih and the barbarian.

Conan looked back over a broad shoulder and muttered a curse as he watched the woman round a corner out of sight. When he turned back to Heng Shih, the Khitan's round, yellow face was split by a grin that the barbarian found vexing.

In the mansion's opposite wing, the burning tapers were fewer and the rooms seemed unoccupied and unused. The hallway finally ended in a door that Heng Shih shoved open roughly. Within was a small, windowless, but elegantly appointed bedchamber. Conan stepped inside, and turned to the Khitan.

"My sword," he said. "Bring me my sword. I shall sleep poorly without it at hand." Heng Shih performed an elaborate shrug that seemed to indicate that he found the quality of the Cimmerian's rest of less than paramount concern. With that ambiguous gesture he closed the door upon the barbarian, leaving Conan wondering when he might hold his sword again.

Alone, Conan stretched like a weary panther as fatigue came over him despite what he had said to the Khitan. He examined the door, checked that it could not be locked from the outside, then sat down heavily on the bed. Falling back to sprawl among the velvet blankets, he let himself drift, confident that his senses would awaken him to any danger. He was sleeping soundly when there came a gentle knock at the door.

The Cimmerian snapped from slumber to complete waking clarity with the speed of a wild animal. He sat up on the bed, planted both feet on the floor, and wished that he had a weapon.

"Come," he rasped and waited. The door swung open soundlessly. The first thing that he saw was the proffered hilt of his sword.

"So," Conan began, "you decided..." He fell silent.

It was Neesa who brought him the sword. She stepped tentatively into the room, bare white arms extending from filmy sleeves as she held the hilt of the heavy broadsword out to him. Her only garment was a diaphanous robe that floated about her like a soft cloud of translucent vapor. The room's single taper illumined the long curves of her slender body through the robe's revealing gossamer.

"I—" Neesa's voice faltered. "I was afraid that Heng Shih would not bring you your sword and that you would think that we mistrusted you. I thought—" She flushed and thrust the sword out to him. Conan took his blade and held it uncertainly, his gaze fixed upon her. He had come to his feet without thinking and now he became painfully aware of the woman's obvious discomfort.

"Neesa," said Conan hoarsely. "I'll take Zelandra's payment in gold."

"What? They don't know I'm..." she stammered. Her face twisted in mingled confusion and anger. "Damn me for an idiot!" she exclaimed savagely. With that she lunged forward, throwing her arms around the barbarian and crushing her mouth against his. The sword was pinned between their bodies. Conan released it, his arms moving automatically around her. Neesa laid her hands upon his wide chest and thrust him away, breaking the embrace. The sword dropped to the carpet, where it lay unnoticed. Wild-eyed and panting, Neesa glared at the Cimmerian, who looked on in mute amazement.

"I am not payment," she gritted. "I thought... oh, to hell with what I thought!" She whirled and ran from the bedchamber, slamming the door behind her.

Conan stared at the door for a full minute. He glanced down at his sword to be certain that it was really there. Then he sat on the bed again and rubbed his jaw. He reflected that it made little difference how long he lived or how many women he knew, the opposite sex continued to provide surprises. Apparently Neesa had come to him of her own accord and he had managed to drive her off with a few ill-chosen words. It certainly wouldn't be the first time that he had shown poor judgment where women were concerned.

But there was little point in worrying about it. All and all, this was a



superior close to a difficult day. He was employed, free of Shakar's magic, and lying on a fine bed with a belly full of wine. Conan lolled back on the blankets once again and kicked off Ms boots. Things had, indeed, been much worse. In a few moments the barbarian was asleep.

## ***Chapter Ten***

Alone in her bedchamber, Zelandra brooded.

The torches burned as ruddy as dying embers, filling the room with a ruby twilight that matched the sorceress's mood. Her long, silken robes whispered on the marble floor as she moved among her books, studying the unwieldy piles on the tables and then methodically examining her shelves. In a corner, she knelt and pulled an armload of long leather tubes from behind a row of books.

Shoving the tomes aside, she piled the leather tubes on a table, peering at each in turn. Zelandra selected one that was pale and slender, and drew from it a rolled scroll of parchment. It was a map, darkened by age and inscribed in a dead language. The sorceress muttered to herself, smoothing the crackling scroll flat on the dusty tabletop.

The map depicted the eastern regions of what was now Stygia, but the highland areas were sketched in with little detail. Zelandra sighed. The map seemed all but useless; still, it would have to suffice. She thrust the scroll into the tube and set it beside her bed. Then she hesitated, wrapped in indecision.

Resolution came to Zelandra, sending her striding to the far corner of the chamber. She reached for a torch, twisting it in its sconce, and a section of the bookshelf-lined wall swung open like a door. Within was a tiny, circular room hung with curtains of black velvet. A single chair sat at a round, ebony table that all but filled the little chamber. The sorceress stepped into the secret room, and the door swung shut, sealing her in darkness.

Zelandra whispered a soft incantation, and an unearthly silver glow dispelled the gloom. Ten spheres of hematite were set in a circle on the tabletop, and they radiated a chill illumination.

The sorceress sat in the chair, touching each of the stones in turn. Silver light raked her features, turning them stark and sinister. Her hands

danced over the ring of stones, describing intricate patterns, and a patch of light appeared in the air before her. It rolled and seethed, suspended above the circle of silvery stones like a ball of glowing smoke.

"Mithrelle," said Zelandra clearly. "Mithrelle."

The ball of smoky light vanished, and it was as though a distorted mirror suddenly hung before Zelandra. The flattened image of a woman's face peered at the sorceress, floating above the table.

"Mithrelle," said Zelandra. The conjured face blinked as if startled. It was a face of extraordinary beauty.

"Who dares?" The voice was rich and throaty, sounding as if its owner shared the little room with the Lady Zelandra.

"Who dares, indeed." Zelandra smiled casually, but her hands were clenched into tight fists, and the pulse fluttered visibly in her throat.

"Zelandra!" The woman called Mithrelle smiled in recognition. Black hair hung in heavy coils around her pale face. Eyes like pools of oil gleamed with dark humor. Her lips were stained so deeply red as to appear black. "To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

"Greetings, Mithrelle. I'm loathe to disturb you at this hour, but I have need of information. And everyone knows that there is no one so well informed as yourself."

Mithrelle laughed, throwing back her head and baring her white throat. On her breast, a swollen garnet hung from a necklace of black pearls. "Flattery! This is not like you, Zelandra."

"I need your help, Mithrelle."

"Even so? You have had little use for me since we studied together."

"Your path is not my path, Mithrelle."

"Oh no." Mithrelle's tones grew heavy with sarcasm. "The lady prefers the quiet life of a scholar. She hides away in Akkharria with her slaves, only venturing out to go to market."

"How is Sabatea, Mithrelle?" Zelandra's voice turned hard.

"Very well. I have performed a few favors for the sorcerers of the Black Ring, and they have been appropriately grateful. My life is full of pleasures. And your own? Is that strapping Khitan slave still keeping you company?"

"I freed Heng Shih long ago," said Zelandra tersely. She fought to control herself. Anger would accomplish nothing.

"Of course you did. I'd expect nothing less. You are the same woman you were a score of years ago. Yet, I have heard rumors as of late that the reclusive Lady Zelandra is seeking a more public position. I couldn't credit it." Mithrelle paused theatrically, lifting a long-fingered hand to stroke her chin. Her nails were sharp and gleamed with black lacquer.

Zelandra shrugged in resignation. She should have known that Mithrelle would ask at least as many questions as she answered.

"I'm seeking the position of court wizard to the king."

"It's true, then," exclaimed Mithrelle in mock surprise. "And why would the Lady Zelandra demean herself by working for another? Could it be that her inheritance is dwindling and that she must needs earn a living for the first time in her life?"

"I fail to see why you ask so many questions," Zelandra replied stiffly, "since you obviously know all the answers already." Mithrelle laughed in delight, her mirth as sweet and cloying as poisoned honey.

"Indeed. That is why you sought audience with me, is it not? Now, how can I assist my old friend?"

"Tell me of the Stygian sorcerer named Ethram-Fal."

"Phaugh!" Mithrelle grimaced delicately. "What do you want with that one?"

"He has insinuated himself into my affairs. He claims that he can sell me magical talismans of unprecedented power."

"Ah." The Sabatean's eyes lit up. "I see. You wish to know if his goods can assist you in claiming the position of court wizard."

The sorceress nodded ruefully, as if admitting an unwelcome truth. Inwardly, Zelandra rejoiced that Mithrelle was not as perceptive as she believed herself to be.

"Ethram-Fal is a laughingstock. I presume that you have heard how he came to Sabatea seeking membership in the Black Ring. Even the feeblest student of the dark arts knows that the Black Ring recruits its own members, yet still the dolt came calling. Perhaps he imagined that his greatness had escaped the notice of the Black Ring. They were more merciful than might be expected, however, merely casting him out of the city in disgrace. If Thoth-Amon had been about when Ethram-Fal made his plea, the upstart would probably still be screaming under the Steel Wings."

"Do you know where he dwells?"

"Ethram-Fal was born in Kheshatta, though I believe that he left the City of Magicians in order to take up residence here in Sabatea. The Dark Gods alone know where he has fled since his exile. You have seen him in Akkharia?"

"Yes, but his home is elsewhere."

Mithrelle's eyes grew hooded and lazy. "Why should this be so important to you? Ethram-Fal has little to his credit save his considerable skill in the magic of plants, fungi, and such. Still, I hardly imagined that his rejection by the Black Ring would drive him to become a merchant. What manner of magical talismans did he offer, that you felt it necessary to call me?"

"Just a handful of potions and philters. Magic intensifiers, mostly." Zelandra fought to keep the tension out of her voice, smiling sheepishly. "I shall need all the aid I can muster to be chosen as King Sumuabi's court mage."

"Yet you don't seem curious about your rivals. What is it that truly concerns you about Ethram-Fal, Zelandra?"

"It is small wonder that I do not converse with you more often, Mithrelle. You are the most suspicious woman I have ever known."

Zelandra's hands crept across the table toward the shining spheres of

hematite. The image of Mithrelle swelled and throbbed brighter.

"Oh no, milady. Don't think to end this audience just yet. I can't abide unanswered questions, and you have made me very curious."

"Goodbye, Mithrelle." Zelandra slipped her hands down on two stones. The flat image of the Sabatean sorceress flickered and dimmed, then abruptly flared to brilliant life.

"You would desert your old friend?" Mithrelle's voice dropped to a guttural growl. "Come to me, little Zelandra. Come to me and answer my questions and be my slave." The oval image expanded rapidly and acquired depth. Zelandra felt as if she stared into an open portal carved from empty air.

Mithrelle's bare, white arms shot out of the image. Her hands seized Zelandra about the throat. Black nails scored Zelandra's flesh as the Sabatean sorceress reached into the chamber as if leaning over a windowsill.

"You would toy with me, Zelandra? Did you forget that I was always your better? Come!" Mithrelle's long-fingered hands squeezed off her breath, lifting Zelandra from her seat.

The blood roared in the sorceress's ears. She pulled back against the Sabatean's embrace, lifting her hands from the silver-glowing stones and clapping them upon Mithrelle's temples. Crimson lightning crackled from her palms. Mithrelle's mouth fell open like a castle's drawbridge, but no sound emerged. Her hands sprang from Zelandra's throat and clawed spastically at the air.

"You were always overconfident, Mithrelle," said Zelandra hoarsely. She dropped her hands onto the stones. Mithrelle's arms were wrenched forcibly back into the image, which shrank and flattened until it once again resembled a floating mirror.

"You can't!" The Sabatean found her voice. She snarled like a beast, a lank lock of black hair falling across her pale face. "You can't!"

"I can," said the Lady Zelandra. Her hands moved upon the stones and the image winked out in a scarlet flash, like a bursting bubble of blood.

The sorceress stood, stretching wearily and rubbing her bruised neck as the secret room's door swung open behind her. She returned to her bedchamber, where the torches burned ruddy and low. Casting a glance at the forsaken bed, Zelandra shook her head and sighed. There would be no more sleep tonight. She moved silently about the room, gathering her belongings for the long journey ahead.

## ***Chapter Eleven***

Broad beams of golden sunlight stretched across the floor of Shakar's study. The black sorcerer stood quietly, staring out the open window into the verdant splendor of his garden. A cooling breeze bore both the songs of birds and the perfume of greenery into the room, but the tranquil pleasures of the garden went unnoticed by the Keshanian mage today. He walked slowly from the window seat across the study, leaned listlessly against his wide mahogany desk, and tried not to think of the silver box mat he had placed within it.

The sound of a slamming door came to him and he started violently, turning eager, sleepless eyes to the study's curtained entrance. Gulbanda burst in, panting, his crested helmet clutched under one dark-armored arm.

"Master," Gulbanda said between gasps. "The barbarian, Lady Zelandra, and two of her servants have left the city!"

For a moment Shakar looked as though he might fall; then a surge of rage seemed to buoy him up.

"You lie!" screamed the Keshanian. His hands twisted through a series of swift movements, ending with his left hand raised, its fingers crooked into talons. Gulbanda knew the gestures that preceded the death-spell and fell to his knees.

"Master, I swear that it is true. I saw them leave by the caravan gate, and even now they ride the Caravan Road toward Sabatea. The amulet was gone from the barbarian's neck. I swear it." The sweat of fear shone on the warrior's face.

Shakar spun away from the kneeling man, waving his fists in uncontrolled fury.

"By the Black Gods, am I to be thwarted at every turn? Where were they bound?"

"So help me, Master, I know not. I watched the lady's house as you instructed and, when they departed, I followed them to the caravan gate. Then I came directly to you."

Facing the window, Shakar's arms dropped limply to his sides. He turned back to his bodyguard, face haggard but calmed.

"Arise, Gulbanda" he said quietly. "Forgive me for threatening my finest servant and most loyal friend." As Gulbanda faltered to his feet, Shakar took him by the arm and led him to the window seat.

"Here, sit down. You must be tired after your long vigil."

"I slept not a moment last night, master." Heavy lids half veiling his eyes attested to his honesty.

"Nor did I," said the mage. "Come, let me take your breastplate and helmet. We shall relax, eat, drink, and plan what is to be done." The Keshanian helped Gulbanda out of his breastplate, mail shirt, and helmet, setting them on a table across the room. He brought a split loaf of bread and a crystal decanter of wine from a cupboard against the far wall, and set them before Gulbanda as though he were the master and Shakar the servant. The bodyguard hid a grin of bemusement. A surprise until Shakar had turned away again. He reflected that, if his master was losing his mind, then he had certainly picked the right way to go about it.

"Is the wine to your liking?" asked the Keshanian, slipping into the chair behind his desk and silently drawing open a drawer. Gulbanda sipped thirstily from the bottle, finding the wine's taste odd but quite agreeable.

"It is sweet," said the warrior, tearing off a bit of bread. "I've never had its like."

"It is brewed from Brythunian apples and is a bit stronger than it may seem." Shakar's hands were busy in the drawer of his desk. "Tell me, my friend, how shall we avenge ourselves upon the barbarian and claim the cask from Lady Zelandra?" Gulbanda took another swallow of the sweet wine and found that it snaked a path of heat down into his belly.

"Well, if we move swiftly we could follow them to whatever their destination might be, then ambush and kill them. I would say that we could do it alone if not for my wounded hand and your..." he faltered, "...your sickness."

"Ah," said the Keshanian, "you suggest that I hire more men?" His hand drew the silver-chased casket from the velvet-lined interior of a drawer, set it on the desktop, and flipped open the lid.

"Yes, two or three bravos with ready daggers would even the odds." Gulbanda washed down a bite of bread with another swallow of wine and found that the sweet stuff was going to his head. Behind him, Shakar lifted a tiny spoon to his mouth twice in rapid succession. "Of course," added the bodyguard, "I would duel the barbarian alone if it were not for my wound."

The sorcerer tensed his body against the shudders that racked it. He blinked back tears and drew a deep breath, shaking off the pain.

"Do you know where such men can be hired?" Shakar's voice had gone hoarse, but his bodyguard paid no heed. Gulbanda was taking another pull on the jug and relishing the warmth blossoming through his body.

"Yes, yes," he said. "I have a few men in mind right now."

"Tell me about them," said Shakar, though he wasn't listening. He was removing a number of distinctive items from the drawer of his desk and setting them before him. First was an eight-inch length of hollow bamboo, cut diagonally so that its base was an enclosed cup and its top a long tapering blade as sharp as broken glass. He stood it on its base. Next was a small vial of black crystal, which he uncorked, pouring a honey-thick, translucent fluid into the base of the bamboo spike. Last was a lace handkerchief baring a darkly crusted stain of dried blood. With a thumbnail Shakar scraped flakes of coagulated blood from the fabric, dropping them into the bamboo receptacle. He then clutched the spike with both hands and muttered a word in a dialect sacred to the priests of Keshia. A thin, almost invisible, curl of smoke arose from the bamboo spike. He palmed it as though it were a dagger and rose from behind his desk.

"Worthy cutthroats all," finished Gulbanda. "A few gold coins will secure their loyalty unto death, Shakar." His voice had taken on a barely



noticeable slur.

The Keshanian showed nothing but calm interest, but he bristled inwardly as he advanced upon his bodyguard. The dog had addressed him by name rather than as master. That would make his task easier. He laid a cold hand on Gulbanda's shoulder, studying the thin leather jerkin that was now the only barrier protecting the warrior's full-muscled torso. The bodyguard shifted in his seat to face his employer. His bleary eyes focused on Shakar's expressionless countenance.

"But you, Gulbanda," said Shakar almost tenderly, "you will be loyal to me far, far beyond death." And he slammed the bamboo spike into the center of Gulbanda's chest with all of his strength. The bodyguard cried out, lurching to his feet with Shakar clinging to him like a leech. The Keshanian jammed the length of bamboo into Gulbanda's body, pouring the weapon's contents into the wound. A wild scream tore from the bodyguard's throat and his body spasmed, falling to the floor with Shakar still holding tight.

"*Ayah Damballah!*" chanted the sorcerer. "Kill Zelandra, bring me the casket, kill the barbarian, bring me the casket! *Zereth Yog Ayah Damballah!*"

Gulbanda thrashed convulsively on the floor, screaming like a man being flayed alive. His cries and Shakar's chanting mingled in an unholy chorus, each fighting for prominence until the screams died away and Shakar's voice rang alone in triumph.

## ***Chapter Twelve***

Ethram-Fal sat alone in a room carved from living rock and toasted his good fortune. His goblet was fashioned of gleaming silver set with lozenges of polished black onyx. It was brimming with an unwholesome-looking greenish liquid: wine blended with a heavy portion of Emerald Lotus powder. The Stygian swirled the thick mixture in the goblet, then tossed it back. He clamped his eyes shut, his thin throat working as he swallowed, guzzling the goblet's full contents. Pulling the emptied vessel from his lips, he gave a soft, shuddering cry. His gaunt, hunched body shivered within its gray robes.

"Hah! Yes, by Set!" Ethram-Fal's lips writhed away from his green-stained teeth, and his eyes blazed with a terrible light. He released

the goblet, which remained suspended in mid-air before him. The Stygian's pupils rolled back and his emaciated frame stiffened with effort. The floating goblet crumpled in upon itself as though in the grip of an invisible vise. A chip of onyx popped free of its setting and fell to the floor, while the rest of the vessel was slowly crushed together into a shapeless lump of metal. Ethram-Fal laughed with delight and allowed the rough ball of crumpled silver to drop.

He had become stronger than he had ever allowed himself to dream. Let Zelandra try to resist him now. The sorcerer sprawled back in the room's only chair, bulbous head lolling on narrow shoulders. Drugged ecstasy pulsed through him, fueling his fantasies. He remembered standing before her in the sorcerous disguise of Eldred the Trader. He remembered the way that her silver-threaded hair fell upon her slim, white neck. How beautiful she was! And a sorceress as well, by Derketo! Surely here was a woman who could appreciate the true scope of his ambitions. Here was a mature sorceress worthy to stand at his side.

Yet she had rejected him. The memory lashed Ethram-Fal and his eyes flew wide, rolling as he gazed unseeing about the chamber. How could she be such a fool? It was all too obvious that she still had much to learn about him and his Emerald Lotus. But she would doubtless learn her lessons quickly as her supply of the drug dwindled away and her newfound power faded, replaced by the all-consuming hunger that presaged madness and an agonizing death.

The Stygian deliberately slowed his breathing and calmed himself. He needed only to wait and she would be his, crawling and begging for that which she had scorned.

All things that he desired would soon be his. Was he not master of the Emerald Lotus?

The sorcerer rose abruptly and picked his way with exaggerated care through the cluster of tables that stood about the stone room. Each held its own distinctive collection of sorcerous paraphernalia. He shuffled past the large central table whereon sat a glass box enclosing a small bush thickly covered with fat, ruddy leaves. The table he sought bore a darkly stained mortar and pestle, a collection of fluid-filled vials in a metal rack, and a long box of glossy ebony sealed with a small, golden clasp. With shaking hands, Ethram-Fal twisted the clasp. He opened the box and stared within with reverent eyes.

The black box was a little longer than a man's forearm and as wide and tall as a man's hand. It was about half full of deep green powder.

"Half gone," whispered the Stygian, unaware that he spoke aloud. He pursed dry lips as a frown wrinkled his protruding brow. The exuberant confidence that had lifted his spirit a moment ago now seemed a long-dead memory, distant and useless. A chill anxiety tightened his guts. He had been spending too much time experimenting with his new power and not enough tending to that which enabled him to exercise the power in the first place. He must see to the Emerald Lotus, and perhaps harvest more for his personal stock.

He swept aside the blanket that hung over the doorway—there were no doors in the Palace of Cetriss. The dark hall was a smooth shaft cut through solid stone. Ethram-Fal hastened along its length, his sandaled feet raising the dust of centuries. He passed down a spiral stair that coiled through the ancient rock and entered a short,

vaulted room that ended in another hanging blanket. Beyond the blanket stood the Great Chamber, doubtless used as an audience hall by Cetriss in the days of Old Stygia. Now it served as an impromptu barracks for Ethram-Fal's twenty men-at-arms.

The three warriors lounging in the Great Chamber leapt to their feet when Ethram-Fal entered, slapping their right palms over their hearts. The sorcerer smiled thinly, nodding his approval of their attentive devotion. When he had left Kheshatta in search of the Palace of Cetriss and his dreams, he had taken pains to hire the finest and most expensive squad of free lances that he could find. His riches and the fat, red leaves of the Vendhyan kaokao plant had fostered a powerful loyalty in them.

Threading his way among the cots in the Great Chamber, Ethram-Fal smiled. The wizards of the Black Ring had belittled him for devoting himself to the magics of plants and growing things. Such arrogance! They had likened him to a Pictish druid, as if he had anything at all in common with those meek and feeble tree-worshippers. Those ignorant savages feared to so much as disturb the delicate balance of nature, much less to seize it and bend it to their will. Surely the pompous fools of the Black Ring would think differently of him now. He, a wizard whom they had mocked and rejected for his youth and unlikely fields of study, had truly come into his own. The specialized researches that they had disdained had finally led him to the lost palace of the mage Cetriss, creator of the

mythical Emerald Lotus. Soon enough the Black Ring would learn that the lotus was no mere myth, but an ancient reality that he, Ethram-Fal, had personally resurrected. How they would marvel at his power! How they would beg to sample it! From the dust of three thousand years, he would breed a vengeance such as the world had never known.

Lost in his drugged reverie, Ethram-Fal moved down another hallway into a vast, unlit chamber. The Stygian started when he realized where he was and hastened his stride. To his left towered a sable shadow, a deeper darkness amid the dark. It was a great crouching statue of black stone, a sphinx-like, hulking god-thing whose name and nature were unknown to Ethram-Fal. When he had first found the palace and wandered through its deserted halls—the only visitor in many lifetimes—he had found something in this room as disturbing as the black and nameless idol itself. On the stone altar that lay between the proffered talons of the god was a dusty pile of offal. The tiny, desiccated corpses of dozens of rodents, lizards, scorpions and other even smaller vermin lay in a neat mound before the silent and implacable avatar. Now he hurried through the darkened temple and did not look upon the featureless face of the god of Cetriss where it loomed in the murk, staring blindly into the darkness as it had ever since the distant days of purple-towered Acheron.

Down a final length of hall and around a corner, the sorcerer came upon his captain, Ath, standing guard beside a doorway. A luminous sphere of crystal filled a niche in the wall. It gave off a steady yellow-green glow that painted the soldier's polished armor with warm light.

"My Lord," said Ath, bowing low.

"Light," commanded Ethram-Fal, striding past his tall captain and into the circular chamber. The small room remained as it had ever been, save that light globes had been placed in niches set to either side of the doorway. Ath touched these with his own globe, and they brightened so that the cylindrical room blazed with light.

Above their heads the band of writhing hieroglyphics that encircled the walls was clearly visible. Above that a circular balcony of black metal spanning the room's circumference could now be seen. Higher still arched the chamber's domed roof. But the two men's eyes rose no higher than the floor.

In the center of the room lay the leathery husk of a human body

wrapped in a tangle of dry, thorny growths. The withered corpse of Ethram-Fal's luckless apprentice, still clad in yellow tatters, was embedded in the tight embrace of dozens of crooked and browning branches. There were no flowers to be seen.

"Blood of Mordiggian!" Ethram-Fal cursed as fear swelled in his voice. "It is dying!" A sick horror swept through his body, weakening his limbs and closing his throat. Had he killed his dreams even as they were being born, and done so with stupid negligence? The thought was too much to bear. The little sorcerer swayed on his feet.

"Ath," he rasped, "fetch a pack pony." The soldier turned to the door. "Hurry!" cried his master, as Ath ran from the room.

The captain was gone long enough for Ethram-Fal to scourge himself a thousand times over because of the foolish and unnecessary nature of his predicament. When he finally heard the scuff of boots and hooves in the outer hall, he felt the relief that comes with action.

Ath led the party's smallest pack pony into the circular room. The horse was dun-colored and long-maned. Saddleless, it stood blinking in the unnatural yellow-green illumination as the soldier bent and hobbled its legs with lengths of rawhide.

"Here," said Ethram-Fal, "bring it here."

Ath cooed softly to the beast, drawing it forward. Suddenly, the pony seemed to notice the overgrown corpse and shied away, eyes rolling whitely.

"Here, Ath!" insisted the sorcerer. The tall soldier pulled helplessly at the horse's reins.

"He's afraid, My Lord."

Ethram-Fal snatched out his irregularly shaped dagger and moved toward the hobbled pony with the abrupt swiftness of a pouncing spider.

Ath drew back involuntarily at the sight of his master advancing with clenched teeth, wild eyes, and bared steel. The sorcerer seized the pony's forelock and slashed its throat with a single quick, brutal stroke. The beast gave a pathetic whinnying cry as its blood splashed on the stone floor. It

reared, then fell forward on its knees as Ethram-Fal staggered back, crimsoned knife in one rigid fist.

There was a sound like the dry crumpling of aged parchment, and the fungus-riddled corpse moved. Barbed growths beneath the body stirred, rasping on rock, and the Emerald Lotus scuttled across the floor like a gargantuan crab. It batted onto the pony, climbing the animal's breast to sink thorned branches into its gaping throat.

"Holy Mitra!" Ath stumbled backward out of the room, his face pale as ash; but Ethram-Fal stood his ground, held by an astonished fascination that was stronger than fear.

The horse collapsed heavily with the nightmarish growth clutching it in a loathsome embrace, whipping suddenly animate branches around its body as it fell. The barbed and hooked limbs extended impossibly, lashing the air like the tentacles of an octopus.

Realizing his danger, Ethram-Fal tried to dodge past the monstrosity and out the door. A spiked branch flailed against his right leg in passing, laying open the flesh of his calf and drawing a cry of pain. The sorcerer reeled, but Ath lunged back into the room, seizing his master's shoulders and dragging him bodily out into the hall. The two fell against the wall opposite the doorway and would have fled had not the Emerald Lotus suddenly ceased to move. The room went silent and the pony's body lay still, half blanketed by the grotesque bulk of the vampiric fungus.

Ethram-Fal bent to nurse the wound in his calf, but Ath could only stare into the circular room with wide eyes.

"That was well done, Ath. There will be an extra leaf for you tonight." The sorcerer's voice held a satisfaction and pleasure that were lost on his captain, who said nothing.

"I imagined that it might react more swiftly to nourishment since it did not have to revive itself from spores," said Ethram-Fal absently as he tightened a torn strip of his robe around his wounded calf.

"I did not expect it to seek nourishment on its own. I see now why the room was designed as it is. We must feed it from the balcony above or its blood madness, like that of a shark of the Vilayet Sea, may lead it to attack us. You must have the men build some sort of door for the room as well,

Ath."

The tall captain wiped his brow and nodded mutely. Then Ethram-Fal caught his breath as the Emerald Lotus and its prey, shuddered briefly and broke into bloom.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

A horseman rode through Akkharia's market square. A voluminous caftan swathed his rangy body, as though he and his mount had already traversed the desert wastelands far to the east. The rider sat his horse stiffly, looking neither to the right nor left at the teeming activity of the open-air market around him.

Beneath gaudy canopies, merchants hawked their wares to the interested and the disinterested alike, crying out the merits of their products in lilting, sing-song cadence. Stalls packed with richly woven clothing, worked metals, and medicines crowded others heaped high with Shem's bountiful harvest of dates, figs, grapes, pomegranates, and almonds. All drew customers willing to haggle for what they sought, filling the dusty afternoon air with the clamor of a thousand disputing voices.

A potter, clad in the spattered robes of his profession, lunged from, his sparsely attended stall brandishing a slender ceramic flask.

"Ho, warrior!" he shouted to the rider. "I have just the wine vessel a traveler needs! Flat enough to strap to your saddlebag and as sturdy as stone, it will outlast a wineskin by years! With Bel as my witness, I fired it myself and it is yours for the meager sum of three silvers!"

The man on the horse rode past as though he heard nothing, not even turning his head to look upon the insistent merchant. The potter's continued declamation of the wonders of his work were soon lost in the tumult as the rider moved on.

The city wall loomed ahead, a massive fortification of sun-bleached brick that rose to four times the height of a tall man. The imposing caravan gate stood wide open, but was clogged with travelers both entering and leaving Akkharia. The arched opening was decorated with inlaid tiles of vivid blue; two golden ceramic dragons struggled above the gate in a time-worn bas relief.

The rider nudged his skittish horse into the slow stream of humanity before the towering gate. He drew the eyes of the guards, for most men led their beasts into or out of the city, and the mounted man overtopped all heads in the seething throng. But the guards took note of the rider's size and said nothing. After all, there was no law against riding from the city; dismounting was merely a courtesy to the thickly packed crowd.

Another man also noticed the horseman and shouldered into the press toward him. He was a stout Shemite with a florid face, dressed in colorful silks that marked him as a wealthy merchant.

"Your pardon, sir," he cried, as he struggled toward the rider. Ducking around a wooden cart bearing stacked cages full of squawking chickens, the merchant drew up beside the mounted man, who did not slow his pace or otherwise acknowledge the merchant's presence.

"You're not traveling the Caravan Road alone are you? It is most dangerous for a single traveler, even a slayer like yourself." The merchant panted as he dodged along beside the rider, his florid face growing even redder. "Take passage with my party and be a guard. I pay as well as any betwixt here and Aghrapur."

The horseman did not respond. The merchant made a wordless sound of exasperation and snatched the horse's reins, drawing the beast up short amid the moving crowd.

"I tell you that the Caravan Road is dangerous for a man alone. Zuagirs roam the plains as well as the hills these days. You should..."

The rider bent rigidly from the waist, leaning over and thrusting his face into the merchant's. Eyes like frosted balls of black glass stared out of a sunken, yellowed visage. Bearded lips twitched over clenched teeth, throwing a pale scar into bold relief.

"Death," said the rider in a voice like two stones grating together. The merchant released the reins and the rider put spurs to his mount, plunging forward into the throng, out through the gate and into the open air beyond.

The crowd dispersed along the wide, dirt road as the rider urged his horse to a full gallop. Around him the golden sun fell upon the sprawling, verdant grasslands of Shem, but the horseman was blind to all but his



mission. Caftan flapping about him, Gulbanda looked to the horizon, his glazed eyes full of pain and purpose.

"Death," he said again, and the wind tore the word from his yellow lips.

## ***Chapter Fourteen***

Caravan routes lay across the length and breadth of Shem like an intricate system of arteries, bearing the ceaseless trade that was the mighty nation's lifeblood. From the gleaming ziggurats of the lush western coast to the sprawling tent-cities of the arid east, Shem, in all her contrasts, was united by the continuous flow of commerce. The routes the trading caravans followed ranged from broad roadways of bare, hard-packed earth to vague trails but rarely traversed.

Two days' travel east out of Akkharia, the Caravan Road forked, sending a branch questing north toward prosperous Eruk and ancient Shumir, while the original route continued east toward the ill-regarded city of Sabatea. Countless sub-routes broke south out of the main road,

seeking the smaller cities and villages built along the fertile coast of the world-girdling River Styx.

Along the central route to Sabatea came four riders leading two well-laden pack horses. The party moved at a steady pace upon a dusty road that cleft luxuriant meadows blanketing low, rolling hills. The sun shone down from a cloudless, brassy sky. Off to the north, where the hills rose in slow undulations, a scattered herd of cattle grazed in a sea of waving grass.

Conan of Cimmeria tugged at the throat of his new shirt of white silk, popping stitches in the collar to loosen it around his bull neck. Also new were the blue cotton breeches tucked into the tops of his battered old boots. Heng Shih had reluctantly furnished the barbarian with clothes from his own wardrobe. The size and weight of the two men were similar, but the shape of their frames was so different that Conan found the garments binding where they should have been loose and baggy where they should have been tight. The collar of the shirt emitted another pop as he pulled at it, then ripped jaggedly down across his breast, revealing Conan's weathered and rust-spotted mail beneath.

Heng Shih winced at the tearing sound and let loose a sigh audible even

above the clomping of the horses' hooves. Turning in the saddle, Conan gave the Khitan a wide grin of infuriating friendliness. Then the Cimmerian nudged his mount up toward Neesa.

The scribe had never ceased looking about herself in wide-eyed wonder since they had passed through Akkharia's gates. As Conan moved up beside her, she took her eyes from the distant hills, lowered the hand shading her face from the sun and favored him with a shy smile. The barbarian nodded expressionlessly. For the last two days Neesa had taken pains to address him only when necessary, and then to speak only in the most bland and business-like fashion. Now her smile was warm and friendly, if somewhat wary. He wondered once again how long he would have to live before he found the ways of women to be predictable.

He reined up alongside the Lady Zelandra, who led the small caravan on her roan. The sorceress took little note of him, her eyes focused on the hazy, far-off point where the road met the horizon.

Conan noticed a bulky leather pouch attached to her belt. It thumped heavily against her rounded hip with each step her horse took.

"Milady," said Conan roughly, "that looks to be uncomfortable. There is room in my saddlebags. If you wish, you can stow it there."

Zelandra shook her head. "No, Conan, this is my cask of Emerald Lotus. I must have it on my person at all times in case the craving grows too great." As she spoke, her voice softened with shame and her gaze fell to the road passing beneath the horses' hooves.

"Crom," murmured the Cimmerian, "you are a canny woman and a sorceress in the bargain. How is it that you are enslaved to a magical powder?"

The barbarian's natural bluntness did not seem to disturb the Lady Zelandra. She sat up straight in her saddle. The warm breeze drew her silver-threaded hair out for a moment in a fluttering pennant.

"I have lived on an inheritance for all of my life, Conan. It left me free to indulge in my studies in sorcery and the healing arts. The inheritance is now much depleted. Of almost a score of servants, now only Heng Shih, Neesa, and a pair of drunken guardsmen remain."

Conan, having witnessed the incompetence of her guardsmen firsthand, merely nodded. "With the inheritance gone, you sought employment with King Sumuabi as his Court Wizard."

"Yes, it seemed a worthy way to continue my lifestyle as scholar and sorceress. I should have been granted the position immediately if Shakar the Keshanian had not also offered his services to the king. To think that Sumuabi cannot choose between that jester and me!"

The Cimmerian frowned reflectively. "I have heard rumors that King Sumuabi may soon lead Akkharria to war. If this be so, he would likely seek a wizard with war-like skills. Perhaps he meant to set you and the Keshanian at each other's throats and select the stronger as his sorcerer."

Zelandra looked at the barbarian, her brows raised in surprise. "I hadn't thought of that. How barbaric!" She flushed. "I'm sorry, Conan. I didn't mean—"

"It is nothing, though that sort of guile sounds damned civilized to me."

"Well, we were at a stand-off in any case. When Ethram-Fal sought audience with me in the guise of Eldred the Trader, I was pleased to see that he offered a number of rare and exotic magical components for sale. I should have been more wary when he claimed to have acquired a quantity of the Emerald Lotus."

"You knew of this lotus?"

"It is legend, supposedly created by Cetriss, a mage of Old Stygia, who bargained with the Dark Gods for it. It is said that the sorcerous power of the lotus helped the seers of Old Stygia keep the world-hungering empire of Acheron at bay almost three thousand years ago. Legends disagree as to its uses and effect, but all agree that Cetriss saw little value in his lotus or in any of the works of man and that he devoted his life to the pursuit of immortality. Disdaining his fame and power, he disappeared into the wilderness, taking the secret of the Emerald Lotus with him. You see? The Emerald Lotus is like the perfect love philter or the fountain whose waters bestow youth: a fable born of men's wishful imagining."

Conan squinted skeptically in the sun. "Yet you accepted it from a stranger?"

"It was easy to ascertain that it was not a natural lotus and easier still to determine that it was not a poison. When Eldred—I mean Ethram-Fal—told me that he had just sold a casket of it to Shakar the Keshanian, I felt bound to at least experiment with the stuff. How could I know?" She paused, mouth twisting into a wry smile. "He sold it to me at a very reasonable price," she added with measured irony, drawing a gusty laugh from the barbarian.

"I'll wager he did at that. And the next thing you know the powder has you by the throat?"

Zelendra's left hand shot out to seize his thick right forearm in a cold-fingered grasp. She stared at the Cimmerian with darkly imploring eyes.

"You don't know what it's like. When I first sampled it I felt that there was nothing in the world that I might attempt that would not come to success. There was a mad confidence and exhilaration unlike anything I have ever known. My sorcery almost doubled in its potency. Complex spells seemed obvious. Spells I knew increased in power and effectiveness. It was like a wild and glorious dream until it began to fade. Then came the craving, and I knew that I was lost."

Her hand fell from his arm. She blinked rapidly, as though holding back tears. Conan pretended not to notice her discomfiture, looking ahead wordlessly.

"It is like a leech upon the flesh of my soul." Zelendra's voice had dropped to a husky whisper, but she continued to speak as though driven by some grim compulsion. "At first I could think of nothing but the damnable powder and the power it brought, but I held myself in check. I vowed that each dose I took would be smaller than the last, if only by a few grains. And so it has been since the first time I tasted it. I had hoped to lower the quantity until I needed none. It is not so easy. My supply is running low and there is simply not enough left to safely purge myself of it. If I could get more, then I might be able to taper off completely, but without a greater supply of Emerald Lotus I shall surely die."

For a moment there was a silence, broken only by the scuff of hooves, the creaking of saddle gear, and the soft surge of the summer wind.

"So," Conan said evenly, "we ride into Stygia and maybe into hell itself

just to get you more of this cursed powder?"

"No!" Zelandra's head snapped up, her profile hawklike against the clear sky. "No, Ethram-Fal deceived and poisoned me as an experiment. And now the arrogant bastard would use his drug's power over me to make me his slave. I'll see him die for it."

The Cimmerian grinned fiercely and, digging his heels into his horse's flanks, urged the beast to greater speed.

## ***Chapter Fifteen***

Though Shakar the Keshanian was exhausted after slaying his bodyguard and performing necromancy upon the corpse, the sorcerer could not take his rest. Time seemed to slow in its course, evening moving into night with glacial deliberation. All through the following day he meditated in his chambers, striving to stabilize his drugged metabolism and fill himself with strength. At first he was successful. Shakar was proud of the power that he had exhibited in the ensorcellment of Gulbanda. Without the unnatural augmentation of the Emerald Lotus, he doubted that he would have been able to accomplish it. Pride in his achievement gave him faith and courage.

But into the second day his body weakened and his consciousness fell into a tighter and tighter orbit around the small silver box which lay upon the mahogany desk in his study. Now he sat at his window, staring out through his garden without seeing it and sipping nervously from the crystal decanter of Brythunian wine he had used to lull Gulbanda. Ignoring a growing tightness in his breast, the Keshanian turned his mind once again to the skilled wizardry he had worked upon his bodyguard, trying to draw comfort from the abomination that he had created and set in motion to accomplish his ends.

"He'll get it," said Shakar to the empty room. "He won't fail. He'll bring it to me or I'll leave his soul sealed within his animated corpse forever. He won't fail because only I can release him into true death." He paused, then repeated: "*He will not fail.*" His voice trailed off as he began to fear that which he had not even allowed himself to imagine until this moment.

What if Gulbanda did not return in time?

The most impressive feat of sorcery that he had ever performed had

been brought about by a great sacrifice. The silver-chased box on his desk was empty. The two spoonfuls that he had taken before slaying Gulbanda with the bamboo spike had been the last, save for a few speckles of green residue.

The tightness in his breast grew more insistent, more difficult to ignore. Shakar turned his eyes away from the west, where the sun set in a bloody welter of tattered clouds, and looked upon the silver box where it gleamed dully in the study's serene twilight. The Keshanian rose from his chair in a halting manner, as though his body were not set on doing that which his mind desired. He walked slowly to the desk and stared down upon the burnished silver casket.

Pain blossomed in Shakar's chest, sending strident bands of tense agony around his torso. The sorcerer cried out and stumbled against the desk, seizing the silver box with hands that shook uncontrollably, hands that pried open the casket to reveal that which he already knew to be true.

"Empty," wept Shakar. "I know that it's empty." Slumping against the desk, he held the cold metal box to his breast and tried to draw a deep breath. The belt of pain that wrapped his ribs loosened a notch.

Through the door the Keshanian saw a flicker of yellow light play along the wall of the hallway outside his study. He blinked in the deepening dusk. A sudden surge of hope drove new vitality through the sorcerer's veins. He pushed himself away from the desk with one hand and stumbled toward the door, still clutching his box. The sinking sun's last rays stained the floor scarlet before him as he half walked, half staggered down the hall. Ahead, flares of multicolored light shone through the open door of his bedchamber.

"Eldred?" The name was a harsh croak. "Eldred, I must speak with you!"

Shakar came into his chamber just as the vaporous haze of colored light finished weaving itself together and faded to white. He stood unsteadily before the supernatural projection as the ebony figure coalesced within its wall of witchfire and regarded him in inscrutable silence. Shakar's teeth ground together in the stillness.

"Speak, Jullah rend your soul! You are Eldred the Trader, are you not?"

The veils of light masking the dark form drew back, exposing a short, bearded Shemite in a merchant's silken garb. The image blurred almost immediately, wavering like a desert mirage.

"Fool," said a voice that was not a voice, "do you imagine that a trader would visit you thus?"

The Shemite merchant faded from view, becoming a hunched Stygian with a bald, misshapen skull. Bulging eyes afire with contempt seemed to sear into Shakar's body.

"Who are you?" cried the Keshanian. "Why do you torment me?"

"I am called Ethram-Fal and I do not torment you. I study you. From your aspect I would hazard that your supply of lotus is gone."

Shakar's mind reeled in a rush of dizzy nausea. A hysterical laugh came through lips drawn back from teeth clenched in a death-like rictus.

"Study?" shouted the Keshanian. "Are you mad? Where is the lotus? I'll give you all I have for more of it!"

"Yes," said Ethram-Fal, "of course you would. Tell me, when did you use the last of it?"

Shakar forcibly calmed himself, drawing in a long, shuddering breath. The hand that gripped the silver box clung to its burden so tightly that pain rippled through the knuckles.

"Yesterday morning I used it in a feat of great sorcery. I need more to—"

"Yesterday morning? You are stronger than I had thought. Has the pain begun yet?" The voice of Ethram-Fal was clinical and expressionless. Shakar could scarcely contain his rage and need.

"Yes!" he cried. "My chest is gripped in a vise of fire. Now give me the lotus!"

"*Silence!*" Ethram-Fal's command rang in the Keshanian's brain like a struck gong, driving him to his knees with its force.

A roiling cloud of inky blackness poured over the Stygian's scornful

features, transforming him once again into an anonymous black figure suspended in a curtain of misty light.

"Who are you to command me, dog? You are too weak and witless to even make a good slave. Take solace in the fact that you have provided a lesson to Ethram-Fal of Stygia and thus aided him in his grand design."

With an inarticulate howl of hate, Shakar opened the silver box and brought it to his face. Thrusting out his tongue, he licked the polished inner surface clean. He hurled the box aside and staggered drunkenly to his feet.

"I'll kill you!" he railed, moving both hands in a swift, arcane series of motions that ceased with both fists extended toward the dark form of Ethram-Fal. A crystalline sphere of azure light shimmered into being before them. It hovered a brief moment, then fell in upon itself, extinguished like a torch in a downpour as Shakar cried out in anguish.

"Your powers fade," said the voice that was not a voice. "You might want to cut your own throat. That would" be both quicker and easier than the death which now awaits you. Goodbye, Shakar."

The Keshanian lunged at the apparition with flailing fists, passed into it without resistance and rebounded from the marble wall. He sprawled on the floor, stunned, with Ethram-Fal's frigid, metallic laughter sounding in his skull. Prone and helpless, Shakar watched the eldritch projection flow into itself and fade until all that remained was an afterimage etched upon his retina.

The Keshanian tried to get up, but his legs felt paralyzed. The tortured nerves of his body jerked spasmodically as pain screwed tightly back around his chest. The effect was spreading, flickering up the sides of his neck to drive nails of agony into his temples. A desperate sanity surfaced in the black warlock's brimming eyes. Crawling from the room, Shakar dragged himself down the hallway to his study. The labored rasp of his breathing was the only sound in the dim and silent house. His legs were useless and the bands around his chest constricted until he grew dizzy and held to conscious action only through sheer force of will.

In the study he used his arms to draw himself up the front of his desk and jerk open a drawer. It fell from the desk, spilling its contents upon the floor. The black-crystal vial broke with a liquid crunch, spattering the



marble with translucent syrup. Shakar let himself fall down beside it, his hands seeking and finding the bamboo spike. He held the bloodstained weapon before rheumy eyes that strained to focus on its razor edge. Both hands gripped the spike firmly by the hilt as he placed its keen length against the flesh of his throat.

Then Shakar the Keshanian took Ethram-Fal's advice.

## ***Chapter Sixteen***

Evening slumbered over the darkened mansion of Lady Zelandra. The single iron gate set in the encircling wall was chained and locked against the oncoming night. The two guards lounged in the kitchen, eating little and drinking much, swearing that they would take at least one more turn around the grounds before abandoning themselves to their cups. In time they did this, shuffling off along the garden's paths, passing their wineskin back and forth and speaking in hushed voices.

The stillness of dusky twilight filled the emptied mansion. The halls were dark, the windows curtained and the tapers all unlit. The manse seemed to lie tranquilly in wait for the return of its mistress. Yet amid the darkness and silence came a visitor unsuspected by the besotted guards.

The wall of Lady Zelandra's bedchamber was alight with blazing color. Wild shadows leapt and capered over the book-lined walls and the opulent, unmade bed. Then a white glare shone from the wall, driving the shadows from every corner of the room.

Ethram-Fal's ebon outline floated in its fog of illumination and regarded an empty chamber. The black, featureless head turned this way and that, as though reluctant to believe that no one was there. Frustrated, the Stygian sent an emphatic, wordless call through the still mansion.

*"Zelandra! I have come for you!"*

The sorcerer sensed no response, no activity at all. The dark form hesitated, standing motionless for a time, then moved tenebrous fingers in quick, precise patterns and lifted both arms above its head. Rays of brilliant green light bloomed around Ethram-Fal's image in a dazzling corona. Then with the slow, unnatural movements of a man walking underwater, the black figure stepped down from the wall and stood within the room. It walked across the floor to the doorway and into the hall

beyond.

Ethram-Fal passed through the deserted chambers of Lady Zelandra's mansion like a restless ghost, leaving behind him footprints of palely flickering witchfire. After a time he returned to the lady's bedchamber, ascended into his haze of sorcerous light and vanished. Zelandra's house was empty; its mistress had departed.

Ethram-Fal wondered if he might soon have visitors of his own.

## ***Chapter Seventeen***

The travelers crested the summit of a red clay ridge and viewed the broad expanse of the Styx River valley spread out before them. The trail zigzagged down a rolling slope through a thickening welter of vegetation. The land had grown more arid as they moved south and drew closer to Stygia, but the shores of the mighty Styx were anything but desert. Green brush crowded the path as they wended their way through clusters of swaying palms and plush meadows rippling in the slow breeze. Ahead, the land lowered further into irrigated fields that reached to the edge of the river itself. Yellow-brown along its shore and a rich, opalescent blue at its rolling median, the mother of all rivers stretched from horizon to horizon like a jeweled and sorcerous girdle bestowing a luxuriant fertility upon the grateful earth.

Though cultivated along much of its vast length, the shores of the Styx were but sparsely populated this far to the east. Scattered clusters of huts, raised upon stilts, were visible in the distance off to the west. Directly before them, the party beheld a small, unwall'd city squatting upon a low, artificial plateau that lifted gently from the canal-crossed fields. A similarly raised road ran amongst the glittering irrigation ditches and broad, cultivated expanses like a sand-colored snake writhing across a bed of lush emerald moss. The road connected the raised city with the drier uplands, where it merged with the Caravan Road that stretched uninterrupted along the length of the River Styx.

As the four descended the trail into the river valley, they began to encounter the natives of this long-inhabited land. They waited at a crossroads while a herd of lowing cattle was ushered past by herdsman brandishing stout sticks that they applied vigorously to the flanks of their charges. Farmers toiled in the irrigated fields of emmer wheat and barley that sprang in abundance from the land's black and silty breast.

The trail became an elevated road that soon afforded them a closer view of the white mud buildings of the city. Neesa waved a slender hand in the humid air, fanning herself. At the moment they rode single file, with the Lady Zelandra leading the way. Neesa knit her dark brows in thought, then edged her mount forward until she rode beside the Cimmerian.

"What city is this?" she asked of Conan. The barbarian grinned at her in open admiration, clearly pleased that she had overcome her unwillingness to speak with him. She continued to study the city ahead of them intently, apparently unnoticing of his attention, though her complexion began to grow rosy.

"It is called Aswana. It has a sister city just across the Styx called Bel-Phar. Aswana is a quiet village and should give us a fine place to cross the river without drawing too much attention."

"The Stygians are said to be unfond of visitors."

"Aye, the snake worshippers would deny every foreigner the right to enter their cursed country if they could. Their border patrols are few, but authorized by King Ctesphon to collar any intruder they wish and judge on the spot if he is worthy to stand on Stygian soil."

"And if he is judged unworthy?"

"Well, any merchant whose trade would fatten the land or a fawning scholar come to pay homage to Father Set would be left to his own ends. The best that most anyone else could hope for would be robbery and a quick kick back across the border. At worst, they'd be crucified at the roadside."

Neesa shivered despite the bright sun, then spat into the ditch.

"And here we come as uninvited visitors," she said. Conan laughed, shaking back his black mane.

"Don't fret, woman. The patrols are few and the land is large. And besides, I'm going with you!"

Laughing, Neesa leaned from her saddle and pressed a swift kiss upon the barbarian's cheek. Then she put her heels to her mount, sending the beast trotting forward and away to Lady Zelandra's side, leaving Conan

rubbing his cheek and grinning in bemused fascination. Neither the Cimmerian nor Neesa took notice of Heng Shih, who rode a short distance behind them. His incredulous expression attested that he had missed nothing of their exchange. The Khitan passed a wide hand over his smooth pate and shook his head in wonder.

Lady Zelandra led her band of travelers along the river's flank. Sweating workers clad only in breechclouts hoisted water from the darkly flowing body of the Styx with the aid of simple mechanisms made of lashed lengths of rough wood. A crude tripod supported an irregular pole with a heavy counterweight on one end, and a large bucket dangled from a rope on the other. The bucket was lowered until it was submerged, then the workers would add their bodies to the counterweight, lifting the full bucket from the river. Finally, the pole would be turned atop the tripod, swinging the bucket over the shore and dumping it into a waiting irrigation canal. To Conan it seemed a tedious way of making one's living.

Once among the white buildings of Aswana, the travelers became objects of much interest. Although the cobbled streets of the city were bustling with activity, Conan's band was conspicuous and exotic enough to draw the attention of the townsfolk. Naked children ran in the dust beside their horses' hooves, crying out to one another in shrill voices. A woman clad only in a diaphanous veil leaned from a second-story window and winked a kohl-darkened eye at the Cimmerian, who raised a hand in salutation, smiling until he felt the sharp and indignant eyes of Neesa upon him. When he turned his smile upon her she looked away, flushing.

Conan slowed in front of a low, windowless building with a crude sign proclaiming it to be a tavern. As he reined in his mount, a lean man in a faded, sweat-stained tunic emerged from the curtained doorway and stood blinking in the afternoon sun.

"Ho, friend," called the barbarian. "Where can I find an honest ferryman in this town?" The man he addressed took on a sour expression as he fingered the dirty headband that confined his tousled, graying hair.

"Well, you won't find one now because Pesouris, may Set gnaw his cod, just took a load of acolytes across this morning. If I know that lazy cur, he shan't be back before nightfall."

"Isn't there another ferryman?"

"No, by the gods. I was a ferryman until the damned Stygians decided that one ferry was enough for Aswana and gave a royal seal to that pig Pesouris. Now he waxes rich, and I am left to test my luck fishing from a ferryboat."

Conan leaned toward the man conspiratorially, fixing him with a knowing gaze.

"What's your name, my friend?"

The fellow peered back at him with faded eyes touched with the blariness of drink.

"I am Temoten. If you wish to speak further with me, ye'd best buy me a drink."

"Temoten, if you still have your ferryboat, why not take us across the Styx? You'll be plucking enough money from the purse of Pesouris to buy yourself a week's worth of wine."

Temoten drew back at the suggestion, his weathered face creased further by a skeptical frown. He shook his shaggy head.

"Nay. Pesouris would report me to the authorities of Bel-Phar, or even to the border patrol if he could. And if any Stygian soldiers were about when we made landfall, they'd want to see my ferryman's seal. As I have none, they'd behead me there on the docks. No thank you, stranger."

Temoten turned to walk off and almost collided with the Lady Zelandra, who had dismounted and now stood before him dangling a leather pouch from one delicate hand.

"My people and I need to cross the Styx without delay, Temoten," she said, "and I'm willing to pay well for the trip. Would you want this pouch to pass into the hands of Pesouris?"

The ferryman reached for the proffered pouch and poured a glittering stream of golden coins into a grimy palm. At once his eyes grew wider and more sober.

"Sweet Ishtar!" Temoten licked lips that had gone suddenly dry and wished mightily for a drink.

"Besides," continued Zelandra, "what fool in his right mind would contest the passage of my friends Heng Shih and Conan?"

Temoten spared a brief glance at the lady's hulking escorts before returning his gaze to enough gold to keep him living in comfort for the better part of a year.

"Only a very great fool, indeed," he breathed. "To nine hells with it. Let's go. What right do the stinking Stygians have to command a free Shemite anyway?"

"None at all, I should think," smiled Zelandra. "Now where can we find your ferryboat?"

The boat was moored to a rotting dock behind Temoten's one-room hut on the outskirts of Aswana. It was a once-elegant vessel of sturdy cedar about twenty-four feet from stem to stern. A single, slim mast rose above the deck, bearing a furled sail of faded yellow. A tattered ox-hide canopy mounted just ahead of the long steering oar offered the craft's only shelter from the sun. When Heng Shih came around the corner of Temoten's hut and saw the boat for the first time, he touched Zelandra's shoulder and communicated with her in a swift passage of sign language.

"My friends," called Lady Zelandra, "Heng Shih points out that there is no room in the ferry for our mounts."

Conan, pulling the saddle and saddlebags from his horse, spoke up: "That's just as well, milady. Camels are a superior mount for desert travel, anyway. Perhaps you and Heng Shih would take the horses into the city and sell them."

Zelandra raised dark eyebrows. "Are you leading this company now, barbarian?"

"No offense intended, milady, but we could use the gold earned from their sale to purchase camels in Bel-Phar."

"That sounds suitable," said the sorceress reluctantly, "but I am scarcely a bargain-mongering trader."

"You bargained me into this expedition easily enough. Just have Heng Shih stare at them if they try to swindle you. I'll wager that you'll get an

excellent price."

"Very well. Temoten, is there a worthy dealer in horseflesh in the city?"

The ferryman, standing on the dock, nodded vigorously.

"Yes, mistress, my late wife's cousin, Nephtah, deals in horses and mules. You will find him at the northeast corner of the market square. Tell him that I sent you and he will treat you as his family."

The remaining saddles and packs were removed from the horses. Zelandra and Heng Shih mounted up, leading the string of riderless animals behind them. The Khitan looked back over his heavy shoulder and fixed his narrowed eyes upon the Cimmerian, who was busily loading saddlebags and provisions onto the boat. Conan heaped the stuff on the worn, red-painted planks of the deck beneath the ox-hide canopy as Zelandra and her bodyguard rode slowly out of sight.

Temoten leaned on one of the dock's cracked pilings, studiously examining the dirty fingernails of his left hand and making no effort to assist the Cimmerian.

"So, Outlander, you seem to know your way around a boat."

Conan stacked a packed saddlebag atop the pile he had built beneath the canopy. "I have some acquaintance with such things," he said quietly.

"Then you can steer, raise a sail, and the like?"

"I see that this craft would be difficult to run single-handed, Temoten. Do not fear, I shall help you get us across the river."

The ferryman looked disgruntled, but kept his silence, staring off into the reedy shallows. Neesa struggled down the sagging dock under the weight of a double waterskin, which Conan took from her and heaved into the boat. She then leapt nimbly onto the rear deck, catching the haft of the steering oar. Clinging to it for support, she leaned out over the vessel's side, gazing across the Styx with the wind in her thick, black hair.

In a moment Conan joined her. The broad, sunstruck river stretched away, flecked with distant skiffs full of fishermen plying their trade. The air blowing in off the water was fresh and invigorating.

"It's beautiful," said Neesa dreamily. "I've never seen the Styx before. I haven't even been out of Akkharia since I was a child."

"Crom," said Conan in a strangely gentle tone, "that's no way to live. You have but one life and one world to live it in. Surely you should experience both as well as you are able. Ymir's beard, I'd go mad if I were cooped up in a single city all my life."

Neesa looked up at him, her black eyes afire with honesty. "I know it's wrong to say it, Conan, but this journey seems the finest thing I have ever done. All of my life I have been grateful to Lady Zelandra for her shelter from the world, and now I find that I am enjoying myself on a voyage made in the shadow of her death."

Conan turned his grim face to the wind. "All journeys are made in the shadow of death," he said simply. "Live now, and know that you will struggle with death when it comes."

The woman stepped into Conan's arms, pressing her lush body against him with feverish intensity. The barbarian, taken aback by her fervency, cupped a hand beneath her chin and lifted her face to his. Tears glimmered in her dark eyes.

"Kiss me," she whispered, and Conan crushed her mouth beneath his own, drawing her into an even closer embrace. After a moment one iron arm encircled her waist as the other swept under her knees and lifted her free of the deck. The kiss broke as the Cimmerian carried her to the canopy that covered their belongings. Neesa saw that he had built a hollow in the center of the pile and spread a blanket therein.

"Oh," she said huskily, "you think of everything." Conan ducked beneath the canopy and gently placed her in the hidden nest of blankets.

"Why do you think I sent those two to town?" he asked, but he gave her no chance to answer.

Out on the dock, Temoten looked from the boat back to his dirty fingernails. With a wistful sigh he turned toward his hut and went inside, looking for a drink.

## ***Chapter Eighteen***



The boat surged through the water, foam purling along its prow. The Styx shone a rich blue beneath the clear sky of afternoon. Small fishing boats made from bundles of papyrus reeds traveled in pairs, trolling nets between them. The busy fishermen paid little heed to Temoten's ferry; yet the ferryman seemed to grow markedly less nervous once they left the fishing boats behind and sailed out beyond the river's midpoint. The patched sail bellied full as Temoten leaned into the steering oar. Beside him, on the rear deck, Conan and Heng Shih relaxed, the barbarian sprawling along the gunwale and the Khitan sitting cross-legged, his face to the sun. Beneath the flapping ox-hide canopy, Lady Zelandra and Neesa sat in, the shade and conversed in low tones.

The trio on the rear deck traveled in silence for some time. Temoten's curious gaze returned repeatedly to Heng Shih, sitting shirtless beside him, his yellow skin gleaming with perspiration.

"Does your friend speak at all?" the ferryman finally asked Conan, who grinned and stretched like a cat in the sunshine. Heng Shih did not open his eyes.

"He is a mute, though he speaks to Lady Zelandra with hand-language."

"What..." Temoten paused, then screwed up his courage. "What manner of man is he?"

Conan thought that he saw Heng Shih's eyes glimmer beneath slitted lids. "A Khitan from the distant east."

"I have never seen his like. Are all men of that country so big and fat?"

Now Conan was certain that Heng Shih's eyes drew open a crack. "Not at all," said the Cimmerian dryly. "He is truly exceptional in that regard."

Temoten said nothing for a time, clinging to the steering oar and looking off to the hazy outline of the far shore. Conan could sense further questions troubling the ferryman and was not surprised when a few moments later Temoten spoke again.

"Why are you in such a hurry to cross the Styx, Conan? And why pay me so much to take you? Are you fugitives? Does the Lady Zelandra flee enemies, perhaps?" The words came quickly until Temoten bit them off. "Not that it is any of my concern," he added, shamefaced.

"Temoten," said Conan seriously, "Heng Shih is a Khitan and Khitans are cannibals. They eat the curious."

At this Heng Shih opened his eyes and squinted at the barbarian; then he turned to the ferryman. Looking up at him, the Khitan slowly and ominously licked his lips.

"My apologies, friends," stammered Temoten.

The remainder of the crossing was made in silence. Conan napped, a bronzed arm thrown over his eyes, until he was prodded awake by Temoten, who needed help to furl the sail.

The city of Bel-Phar was even smaller than Aswana. Its waterfront lay somnolently along a raised foundation of mammoth stone blocks. The Stygians were fond of cyclopean architecture; and it was a rare city of Stygia that did not show some evidence of this fondness. The stained and eroded stone docks of Bel-Phar thrust out into the eternally passing Styx. Papyrus boats of all sizes, and even a few luxurious wooden dhows, were moored in clusters about them. The center of the waterfront appeared to be an open bazaar full of milling people and animals. Temoten wrenched the tiller about, steering his ferry left and to the east.

"Fewer people around the eastern docks," he said half to himself. "Conan, can you..."

But the big Cimmerian was already moving toward the prow of the boat, bending to catch up a long, wooden pole that lay along the starboard gunwale. Heng Shih lifted the pole on the boat's port side and Temoten nodded his disheveled gray head in approval.

The sun had begun its slow fall to the west and shadows appeared in the white city before them. The rolling Styx had gradually dimmed from transparent blue to a murky violet. The docks hove closer as the ferryman steered his vessel to their eastern extremity.

Conan and Heng Shih drove their poles against the oncoming dock, slowing their progress and letting the ferry slide smoothly into place beside a worn stair carved into a solid block of stone. Temoten scrambled forward, snatching a looped line and casting it neatly over a bronze stay set in the dock. The man was suddenly very animated.

"All right, then. Let's move. I've fulfilled my part of the bargain. Let's see you off." He dragged a bulky pack from beneath the canopy and heaved it over a bony shoulder. With his eager assistance, Conan and Heng Shih soon had all their provisions piled upon the dock.

"We'll have to leave this here and go into the market for camels and water," said Conan. "Temoten, will you stay and watch over our belongings?"

"Stay?" burst out the ferryman incredulously. "I'm leaving as swiftly as I can push off."

"I'll stay," volunteered Neesa. "I feel somewhat poorly after the crossing anyway."

Lady Zelandra, Conan, and Heng Shih headed down the dock, leaving Neesa perched atop the heap of baggage. Temoten hesitated at the top of the stone stair.

"Farewell, mistress," he called hesitantly. "Farewell, Conan and Heng Shih." Zelandra turned without breaking stride and waved.

"A good wind to you," shouted Conan, raising a hand. Heng Shih did not even look back.

Bel-Phar's entire waterfront was paved with wide plates of stone. Though the buildings were almost identical to those of Aswana, the atmosphere of the city was much more subdued. The quiet warehouses at the base of the dock were soon replaced by open shops and then the central market itself. The market was busy, if not overly crowded; but its customers seemed warier and less outgoing than their counterparts across the Styx. A stable of camels was located shortly, and Lady Zelandra was immediately joined in friendly argument with its wizened, one-eyed proprietor. Conan, who had been prepared to do the bartering, found himself standing to one side while the sorceress examined the proffered beasts and made derisive comments about each one in turn in fluent Stygian. The little proprietor rose to the occasion, rubbing his hands together with unconcealed delight and chattering pained protests of her harsh judgments. It seemed to Conan that this was set to go on for some time, so he cast his eyes about for a likely tavern.

Out of the moving throng of the marketplace Neesa came running.

There was such urgency in her movements that Conan froze. She stumbled to a halt before him, her bosom rising and falling as she panted.

"Temoten," she gasped. "Stygian soldiers hailed him just as he was casting off. I walked right past them as they came down the dock. They didn't seem angry, but called out that they needed to see his ferryman's seal. Conan, their captain has a kind of bow—"

"How many?" said the barbarian in a low voice. His blue eyes kindled with a dangerous light.

"Five, I think. Six?" She lifted ivory hands helplessly. The Cimmerian pushed past her, stepping swiftly into the crowd. A voice rose behind him.

"Conan, no!" It was Lady Zelandra. But he was already running heedlessly through the market toward the docks. People either dodged or were thrust from the path of the tall outlander, who leapt over a vegetable cart in his headlong haste. Protesting outcries rang out in his wake but slowed him not at all.

At the foot of the dock six saddled camels waited restlessly. Out on the dock itself stood six Stygian soldiers of the border patrol, arrayed in gray silk and burnished mail. A pair were at the dock's far end, appraising Temoten's ferry. One of these rubbed a stubbled chin thoughtfully, as if gauging the craft's value. Two other soldiers were closer, bent over and arrogantly rummaging in the pile of provisions on the dock. The last two were closest, accosting Temoten. The taller of this pair wore the gilded gorget of an officer and was berating the ferryman scornfully. A small crossbow hung at the officer's belt. The other was a shirtless hulk of a man who brandished a heavy-bladed sword before Temoten's terrified eyes with sadistic relish.

Temoten made feeble protests, his lean frame trembling visibly. The tall officer seized the front of the ferryman's scruffy tunic in a mailed fist and jerked him forcibly to his knees. Temoten struggled to rise, and the captain abruptly drove a knee into his unprotected midsection, doubling the ferryman up in agony.

The officer stepped back and nodded perfunctorily to the shirtless soldier with the naked sword. The executioner flexed the thick muscles of his arms, raised the blade above his head and heard the sound of rapid footfalls behind him.

A length of silver steel sprang from the center of his bare breast. It caught the sun, throwing it back into his goggling eyes, then disappeared in a gout of bright blood. As the executioner sank down dying, Conan vaulted the body, whirling his stained broadsword, about his head.

The officer scrabbled desperately for his belted scimitar as the Cimmerian bore down upon him with terrible swiftness. He drove a booted foot into the captain's belly with lithe savagery, knocking the man from his feet and sending him skidding over the stones to the dock's edge.

The remaining soldiers scarcely had time to perceive the fate of their companions before the barbarian was among them like a wind hot from the mouth of hell. The first of the two men riffling through the heap of baggage managed to turn and get his sword half drawn before being cut down by a blow that split helmet and head. The other soldier among the packs got his blade free and lunged at Conan as the Cimmerian wheeled from his second kill. The Stygian's hasty, vicious thrust was hammered aside with such force that the sword was nearly torn from his grip. Conan's return stroke was a blur of speed, bursting his foe's mail at the shoulder, shearing through the collarbone and lodging in the spine. The barbarian yanked on the hilt, but found that his blade was stuck fast in the sagging body.

Seeing his weapon entrapped in the corpse of their comrade, the last two soldiers advanced toward Conan from their position at the dock's end. As they moved to attack him from two sides, the Cimmerian acted. Gripping his hilt with both hands, the barbarian hoisted the dead man bodily over his head and hurled him off of his sword with a convulsive heave of his mighty shoulders. The torn corpse flopped on the stone at the soldiers' feet.

"Come join him in hell," snarled Conan in Stygian, his eyes aflame with unfettered bloodlust.

The soldiers were of two minds about this. The stout soldier on the left leapt over the bloody body of his fellow and engaged Conan, while his more gangly companion hesitated a moment before dodging around the combatants and sprinting away down the dock. If the fighter was dismayed by his erstwhile comrade's desertion, he didn't show it. He carried the fight to the barbarian, sending a whistling series of expertly aimed blows at the Cimmerian's head and torso. The strident clangor of steel on steel rang out over the calm river. Their blades flickered and

clashed in a dire but elegant dance of death. The Stygian rallied, driving Conan back among the scattered packs with a flurry of skillful cuts and slashes. The heel of the barbarian's boot trod upon the corner of a saddlebag, and he staggered, seeming to lose his balance. His arms shot out to steady himself, and his foe lunged in. The stumble was a ruse. Conan abruptly dropped to one knee and brought his blade forward point-first. The Stygian's killing thrust drove him directly onto Conan's sword. The man was transfixed, his own blade passing harmlessly beside the barbarian's head.

For a suspended instant the tableau held; then the impaled soldier dropped his sword to clatter loudly on the stone, and Conan sensed movement behind him. Wrenching his weapon free of the, falling body, Conan spun about to see the Stygian captain advancing upon him with a small crossbow held cocked in shaking hands.

"Are you a demon?" choked the ashen-faced officer. "A bolt from my crossbow will send you back, to hell!"

As his fingers tightened on the crossbow's trigger, Conan dove headlong to the side, rolling over packs and saddlebags and sliding into a crouch.

But the captain had not fired. He pointed the crossbow steadily at the Cimmerian's breast. The barbarian's fingers sank into the cool leather of a waterskin. He gripped it, his mind in a split-second debate as to whether he should shield himself with the waterskin or hurl it at his foe.

"You're damned fast," said the officer, "but now—"

The Stygian's head shot from his shoulders on a jet of liquid scarlet. It sailed through the summer air like a child's thrown ball, falling into the Styx with a hollow splash. The headless body stood in place for a moment, then collapsed bonelessly. Heng Shih stood behind the corpse. Bending ponderously, he wiped his flare-bladed scimitar upon the captain's silken breeches.

Conan shoved himself to his feet and pointed down the length of the dock with his dripping sword.

"That one escapes," he said grimly.

The gangly soldier who had fled from Conan was now mounted upon

one of the camels at the base of the dock. He turned a white face to the men standing among the sprawled bodies of his fallen companions.

"You are already dead!" he shouted in a shrill voice. "I will lead the king's men to you no matter where you hide! I'll see you dead!" His voice broke as Conan suddenly advanced down the dock. Wheeling his camel around, the soldier drove the beast forward and away. The ungainly creature broke into a gallop, passing both Lady Zelandra and Neesa upon the waterfront's stone boulevard.

As the camel and its rider hurtled toward the bazaar, Neesa turned smoothly, watching them go by. With supple grace she pulled the knife from her nape sheath and drew her arm back as though cocking it. Conan's lips grew tight as the rider moved swiftly away from the woman. Precious seconds fled, and Neesa stood motionless. Then her body uncoiled, sending the knife flying after the Stygian. It struck square between the man's shoulder blades.

The soldier slouched lifeless over the neck of his mount. The camel slowed to a trot, then a walk, and then stopped altogether. The man's limp body fell to the pavement, where his mount sniffed at it indifferently.

Temoten was crouched cowering on the carved stone stair. His mouth opened and closed several times before words issued forth.

"Ishtar, Ashtoreth, Mitra, and Set! I have never seen such things in all my life!" He stared at Conan as though the barbarian had sprouted antlers. "Where did you learn to fight like that? Who is this woman who can hurl a dagger so? Who in nine hells are you people?"

Conan cleaned his blade and sheathed it.

"Be silent, Temoten, else I shall wish I had let the headsman finish his job."

"Yes, yes," sputtered the ferryman. "I thank you."

A small crowd was gathering at the base of the dock. From their midst came Lady Zelandra, her noble face dark with fury. Heng Shih ran a hand over his bald pate and became interested in the setting sun.

"You great idiots! Now we shall have to fight the entire Stygian army!"

"I doubt it," said Conan easily. "I'm surprised that there were this many soldiers in town. And I couldn't let them behead Temoten and steal our gear, could I?" Zelandra's anger did not abate.

"And how shall we deal with these people?" She waved a hand toward the burgeoning crowd. "Shall we kill them, too?"

"We need not deal with them at all. The soldiers have kindly left us their camels. We shall be gone before the good people of Bel-Phar decide if they wish to fight us or not. Come, let us load our packs onto our new mounts. Temoten, you should get the hell out of here."

The ferryman hurriedly cast off his line and leapt from the dock without another word. Using one of the poles, he pushed his ferry into the river and then poled out beyond the shallows. As the four looked on, his sail unfurled and caught the wind with a resounding snap.

Neesa led back the camel whose rider she had slain, and the party busied itself loading their gear onto the uncooperative beasts. The crowd grew larger, some men even venturing down the dock to examine the bodies, but no one hindered the imminent departure of the travelers. The soldiers did not seem to have been popular men. When Conan and his comrades rode out of Bel-Phar, the crowd parted to let them pass. The Cimmerian saw curious faces and fearful faces, but none who threatened to bar his passage.

As they rode free of the town's stone foundation out onto the arid soil of Stygia, Conan turned in his saddle and looked back across the Styx. The sail of Temoten's ferry was a small, sable silhouette moving against the purple breast of the evening sky. For a long moment, Conan watched it surging away, then turned back to the road that lay ahead.

## ***Chapter Nineteen***

Ethram-Fal and his captain, Ath, rode down from highlands of stone into a measureless desert of sand and gravel. They led eight riderless camels through an oppressive haze of heat. The unrelenting sun blasted the landscape with a merciless glare, hammering the crumbling soil so that waves of dizzying heat were reflected up from the ground to meet those falling from the sky.

The jagged saw-teeth of the Dragon's Spine lay against the horizon



behind them. From the rugged, rocky crests of the highland ridges, the land descended gradually in an irregular series of broken foothills and canyon-cracked plateaus until it opened out into level desert.

The pair rode in silence. Ath wore full armor beneath a flowing white cloak but seemed to take little notice of the heat. Ethram-Fal wore a baggy, hooded caftan that was far too large for his stunted body. Every few moments, with mechanical regularity, he brought a goatskin full of watered wine and Emerald Lotus powder to his lips and drank.

As the white sun hove past its apogee in the colorless dome of the sky, the crusted gravel beneath their camels' hooves slowly gave way to rolling dunes of ochre sand. The flowing dunes reached to the shimmering horizon, seeming to stretch to the rim of the world. Only an occasional outcrop of ruddy stone, carved cruelly by erosion, broke the monotony of the vast sea of sand.

It was well into the afternoon when the sorcerer and his soldier crested a massive dune and looked down its long slope at a sight to give a traveler joy. An oasis lay upon the naked desert like a bright broach of emerald and turquoise pinned to the breast of a withered mummy. A cluster of vegetation, impossibly vivid against the sand, surrounded a pool struck radiant by the sun.

"There," said Ath needlessly, lifting a long arm to point. Ethram-Fal merely nodded and urged his camel on.

Only hardy scrub clung to the outer boundaries of the oasis, but close to the pool the growth was lush and plentiful. A tall date palm stood beside the water. At the base of its trunk lay the tattered remnants of a simple lean-to, left behind by some traveler.

The two men rode to the pool's edge and dismounted, falling to their bellies to drink the warm, clear water. Ath finished his drink, splashed his face and went to work. A set of four large ceramic water jugs was strapped across the back of each camel. Ath began filling them one at a time, wading out into the pool to submerge the jug and then climbing out to refasten it to a camel's saddle. Ethram-Fal sat cross-legged in the shade of a date palm and watched.

"Ath," he said after a time, "I have been so absorbed in my researches that I have seen little of the men. Do they grow lax from inactivity?"

"No, milord," panted Ath, hoisting a heavy-laden jug from the pool. "I drill them three times each day in the courtyard, and they entertain themselves sparring with one another or hunting the rest of the day." Rills of water ran along the captain's arms as he tied the full jug into place upon the disgruntled animal, who shifted unhappily beneath the added weight.

"They hunt? What is there to hunt?"

"Tiny antelope, milord. The men have only caught one and now place bets as to who shall catch the next."

Ethram-Fal scowled in resentment. "If they catch another, I want a portion of its flesh. Fresh meat would be much superior to our tedious provisions."

Ath waded back into the pool, relishing the flow of water over his skin. "Yes, milord." The next jug bubbled as it filled.

"So their morale is good?" The sorcerer drank from his wineskin and gave a barely perceptible shudder. Ath hesitated a moment before replying.

"There were some complaints when you forbade torches within the palace, and the glass balls of light that you gave us to take their place made some of the men nervous."

Ethram-Fal frowned, then waved a hand in dismissal. "There will be no fire of any kind inside the palace. I touched a petal of the lotus to a candle and it burned faster than dry pine. Tell the men that any who break this rule will pay with their lives."

"Yes, milord."

"And why the concern about my light-globes? Are the superstitious fools afraid of them?"

"Some said that they were unnatural and feared to touch them. I proved that they were harmless by holding several at once. All seem to accept them now."

"By Set's shining coils," Ethram-Fal chuckled dryly, shaking his head.

"These warriors are a weak-minded lot. The light-globes are merely a sea plant sealed in crystal. The magical enhancement is minimal. Well then, are they otherwise content? Do they quarrel amongst themselves?"

"No quarrels, milord. But I've added an additional' guard to each shift after nightfall."

"Two men per shift? That's of little consequence. But why? Does the night watch grow lonely?"

"Not lonely enough, milord. The past two nights the sentries of the third shift reported that something was skulking among the rocks at the canyon mouth." Ethram-Fal sat up straight.

"Something or someone?" he demanded, "What did they see?"

"By Derketo's ivory teats, milord, I had hoped not to tell you of this. I am shamed to say that the men simply grow fearful when left on guard alone after dark, so I added an extra man to each shift."

"What did the guards see or hear, Ath? Answer my question now or know great pain." The sorcerer's voice was taut with displeasure.

"Y-yes," stuttered the soldier, dropping his jug so that it sank into the pool. "I do not mean to displease you, milord. The first night Teh-Harpa thought that he heard something moving in the rocks and, when he went to investigate, thought he saw two shining eyes."

"An animal," declared Ethram-Fal.

"Just so," said Ath, bending to pick up his jug once again. "The second night Phandoros heard sounds of movement and thought that he heard a voice speaking."

"A voice?" The sorcerer came to his feet. "Who was there?"

Ath flinched, holding the water jug before his chest as if it were a talisman against his master's imperious gaze.

"No one, milord. Phandoros scoured the canyon mouth with a torch and found nothing. He was too ashamed to tell me of his fear. I only learned of the matter when I overheard the men discussing it among

themselves. All agreed that Phandoros was mistaken and that it was an animal foraging in the dark. I added the second sentry so that these stories would not work upon the imagination of guards left all alone."

"Yes," said Ethram-Fal, sitting down once again. "That was wise, Ath."

The tall soldier breathed easier and went back to the safe business of filling water jugs. He labored without speaking for some time, but the silent scrutiny of his master grew onerous.

"Our supply of water was quite good, milord. Do you need all these extra jugs filled for some great magic?"

Ethram-Fal laughed condescendingly, smoothing his caftan over bony knees. "It is my intention not to return to this oasis for some time. I wish us to be well supplied with water."

Ath hoped that his master would elaborate, but the sorcerer said nothing more. At last the final jug was sealed and lashed into place upon the shaggy back of an unhappy camel. Ath squatted beside the pool, sipping water from a cupped palm and catching his breath.

Ethram-Fal stood and stretched himself in the shade of the date palm. Hitching the strap of his wineskin over a shoulder, he walked to the pool's edge and pointed into the shallows.

"Ath, use your dagger to dig a small hole in the sand there."

"Milord?" The soldier obediently, drew his dagger, but looked into the water quizzically.

"There," snapped Ethram-Fal impatiently, "beneath the surface before you."

Ath stepped into the pool, splashing diamond droplets in the sun as he hastened forward. Knee deep, he bent and used the blade of his dagger to carve a pit in the sandy mud of the pool's bottom.

"Deeper," commanded the sorcerer, peering over Ath's bent shoulder. "Not wide, but deep." Swirling particles clouded the water as the soldier worked, obscuring his progress, but in a moment Ethram-Fal seemed satisfied.

"Good enough. Now out of the way." Ath stepped back and climbed out of the pool, thrusting his dagger into the sand to dry. He regarded his master with wary curiosity.

Ethram-Fal waded awkwardly out into the water, his oversize caftan floating out behind him. He stopped beside the hole Ath had dug and pulled something from a pocket. He held it out in an open palm, and Ath saw that it was a flattened, black ovoid with a thick seam running around its edge. It filled the sorcerer's hand and had the organic appearance of a monstrously overgrown seed. Ath had never seen anything like it before.

Ethram-Fal whispered words in a language dead thirty centuries, and the black seed twitched in his palm. Bending slowly and reverently, the sorcerer lowered his hand to the smooth surface of the pool and whispered once again. The words rasped together like dry bones. A tangled network of veins appeared on the glossy, sable surface of the seed. Ethram-Fal thrust it under the water, pushing it into the hole and using his hands to bury it. Then he drew back, lifted his dripping hands from the pool, and moved them in a slow, circular pattern over the planted seed. He whispered a final time, turning his hands over abruptly before him. Lurid crimson glyphs blazed brilliantly upon each palm for an instant and vanished.

The Stygian sorcerer slogged out of the pool with a twisted smile on his face. His captain stared with intent apprehension at the spot where Ethram-Fal had planted the seed, as if expecting something horrible beyond words to burst from the waters at any moment.

"Come then, Ath, let us be gone," said Ethram-Fal jovially. He pulled himself atop his squatting camel and clung to its saddle as it rose to its feet. Ath tore his eyes from the pool and mounted his own beast hurriedly, as his master looked on in apparent amusement.

The camels snorted in distaste as they were forced to file out of the only patch of greenery on the parched expanse of desert. They moved steadily, if reluctantly, up the sifting side of the huge dune that flanked the oasis. A hot wind tore sand from the dune's crest and hurled it into the faces of the two men leading the column of camels. Ethram-Fal noticed that the sun had already dried his caftan, which had been dripping wet only a moment past. Once over the dune, Ath drew up short, cursing.

"Set's scales! I left my best dagger stuck in the sand back there." The

soldier pulled on the reins of his mount and prepared to turn about to retrieve his weapon.

"No," said Ethram-Fal firmly. "You must do without it. The next visitor to that oasis is in for a terrible surprise."

## ***Chapter Twenty***

Pesouris the ferryman lounged in a well-padded chair set out upon his dock. At the end of a long day's toil he often found it pleasant to relax here for a time before repairing to his house and the diligent attentions of his concubines. At times like this, when the sun had just dipped below the earth's rim and the breeze came cool and bracing down the twilit Styx, he felt it only proper that he should reflect upon his good fortune and perhaps offer up a discreet prayer of thanks to Father Set. It was the servants of the serpent god, after all, who had made his present prosperity possible. If he had not been granted a ferryman's seal by the Stygian authorities of Bel-Phar, he would still be competing for his livelihood with all manner of motley would-be ferrymen. Now that he alone was authorized to transport travelers across the Styx to Bel-Phar, his wealth and status had exceeded his fondest wishes. A fortnight ago he would have been unable even to rent this dock, and today it belonged to him. Paying even a single full-time concubine would have been beyond his meager means.

Pesouris heaved a deep sigh of satisfaction, his burgeoning paunch straining at his silken girdle. He locked stubby fingers together behind his thick neck and leaned back in the chair. His dark eyes narrowed thoughtfully. He wondered which of the two he should select tonight. An idea burst upon him, causing his thickly thatched eyebrows to raise abruptly. Couldn't they be made to compete for his affections? Of course they could. Why hadn't he thought of this before?

The sudden stream of fantasies unleashed by this new inspiration was cut short by the nearly inaudible scuff of a boot sole on the dock behind him. The interruption displeased Pesouris, who twisted about in his padded chair to face the intruder.

Night and the shadows of two tall palms conspired to make the base of the dock a thick mass of impenetrable shadow. There was someone there, though; Pesouris could just make him out.

"Ahptut? Is that you?" The ferryman called the name of his hired servant and was dismayed at the weak sound of his voice. Bristling a little, he sat up and stared into the darkness.

"You! Who's there!"

The figure of a tall man was barely visible, standing motionless on the dock. A chill fluid seemed to course down the ferryman's back. He fumbled at his waist for the curved dirk on his belt, his mind awl with panicked surmise. Was it that drunken fool Temoten come to claim vengeance? Or a thief out to rob him of his hard-won riches?

Pesouris was still groping for his dagger when the man on the dock took two steps forward, emerging from the shadow of the palms into the pale starlight. He was a big man, standing tall and stiffly straight in a loose caftan that rippled gently in the night breeze. He said nothing, but his presence less than ten feet from the ferryman was mutely threatening. Pesouris finally got his hand on his hilt but did not draw the weapon. He looked into the blackness within the caftan's hood.

"What do you want?" he asked through lips gone suddenly dry. The man on the dock thrust out a hand and pointed at the smaller of Pesouris's two ferries, moored along the dock. Then he pointed out across the star-flecked Styx. The hand disappeared into a pocket of the caftan and came out clutching a fistful of coins. The man tossed them onto the dock at the ferryman's feet. There were several coins, and they clashed musically together as they hit the weathered wood of the dock. The weight of their impact and their vague yellow gleam were not lost on Pesouris. Gold.

"Your pardon, my lord, but I cannot ferry you across at this hour. The Stygians, in their wisdom, forbid it. If you come back at daybreak..."

An uncomfortable moment of silence lengthened until the ferryman felt his pulse quicken with new apprehension. The man on the dock moved, thrusting his hand once again into his pocket and drawing forth another handful of coins. The pile of gold on the dock grew twice as large.

Pesouris looked down upon the spilled coins in sorrow. "I'm truly sorry, master, but it is forbidden for me to take travelers across the river after sundown. Your offer is generous, but if the Stygians caught us they would slay us both." The ferryman spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

He did not have to feign regret. That was a lot of gold.

The man on the dock stood still for a long moment, his flowing white garb giving him the appearance of a silently risen ghost. Then he lunged forward and seized Pesouris by the throat and belt.

The ferryman choked as he was drawn effortlessly up out of the chair. The hand at his throat seemed sculpted from cold granite. The portly ferryman was tossed bodily into the smaller of his ferries. There was a sharp stab of pain as his right knee cracked against the gunwale. If he had not been so full of fear, the pain might well have incapacitated him. As it was, he had the strength to roll over, grasp the slender mast, and pull himself to his feet in the little craft.

"Please," he choked, "I'll take you. Don't..."

The silent man was lowering himself stiffly into the boat. He sat in the prow and regarded Pesouris impassively. Only the vaguest outline of his features was visible in the darkness. There came the dry whisper of steel on leather as the man drew a heavy-bladed sword and laid it across his knees.

The ferryman busied himself poling first off the dock and then along the muddy bottom of the Styx. The ferry was little more than an outsized rowboat fitted with a miniature sail. Pesouris had Ahptut use it to carry the smaller, less wealthy groups of travelers. Now he scrambled to set the little sail as the craft surged out onto the black breast of the Styx.

Once the ferry was well under way, there was nothing Pesouris could do except squint into the darkness for the lights of Bel-Phar and regard his unlikely passenger. The air was chill upon the nighted river and a cooling draught blew back along the length of the boat. It bore a strange scent to the ferryman's nostrils.

Once, when he was very young, Pesouris had traveled by caravan with his father to Khemi at the mouth of the Styx. One morning he had awakened early and set out into the dunes to relieve himself. In a sandy hollow he had found the corpse of a camel. The beast had been mummified by the relentless arid heat of the desert and resembled a sagging leather fascimile of itself. The warm morning breeze had carried the same scent that he smelled now on the cool evening breath of the Styx.



Of a sudden Pesouris longed to look at anything other than his passenger. Turning his head to one side, he noticed a brief flash of froth out on the dark water. Amazed, the ferryman realized that he had spotted a crocodile. There were more flashes, more signs of movement all around the little boat. Here a black, armored muzzle broke the surface, and there a ridged, lashing tail struck foam from a glossy swell. The hair stood up on the ferryman's arms. Crocodiles did not venture so far from shore. And they did not follow ferryboats. The breeze blew stronger, bearing that scent back to Pesouris once again, and suddenly he understood. Crocodiles are eaters of carrion. They smelled it, too.

By the time that the sparse lights of Bel-Phar's waterfront came into view, Pesouris had completed a long and most sincere prayer to Mitra. He had briefly considered praying to Set before deciding upon the more merciful god of the Hyborians. If he survived this evening, he promised both a vastly generous donation to a temple of Mitra and a serious change of lifestyle. Looking to either side of the ferry, he felt certain that his prayers were falling on deaf ears. The man sitting in the prow of his boat had not changed position and if he noticed the swarm of crocodiles following them, he gave no sign.

"Master," said Pesouris, hating the shrill sound of his voice, "we are almost across." No response. He mustered his flagging courage. "Master, the water is full of crocodiles."

The man in the prow remained silent.

Pesouris concentrated on bringing his ferry in to a darkened, deserted dock, pointedly ignoring both his somber companion and their reptilian escort. When the little boat grated against the stained stone blocks of the dock, the ferryman felt a surge of relief, immediately followed by a rush of stark terror.

The man in the prow stood up, naked sword in his hand. Pesouris fell to his knees in the bottom of the boat, clenching his eyes shut against the blow he knew would come.

"Please, master," he pleaded. "I'll tell no one of your passage. Spare your poor servant."

A weight lifted from the prow of the ferry. Pesouris opened his eyes to see his passenger standing on the steps carved into the stone of the dock.

The waterfront seemed unnaturally silent. On the neighboring pier a lone torch flickered yellowly from a sconce set in stone. The man sheathed his sword with a swift movement and tugged back the hood of his caftan, paying no heed to Pesouris whatsoever. He turned and started up the steps.

"Master," called the ferryman. The tall man stopped, turned, and looked down at Pesouris, who cringed but spoke.

"Master, who are you? What do you seek here?"

The flesh of the man's face seemed impossibly drawn and sunken in the faint torchlight. The mouth opened and closed stiffly, as though its owner had forgotten how to speak. A scar shone pale through the lusterless growth of beard.

"Death," said Gulbanda, and moved away up the stairs into the night.

## ***Chapter Twenty-One***

T'Cura of Darfar scrambled down from the jagged rock spur that he had been using as a lookout for most of the morning. Below him, twelve men lolled quietly beside their hobbled horses, clustered in what shade they could find atop the boulder-strewn ridge. Neb-Khot, the small band's leader, squinted in the merciless noonday glare, watching T'Cura descend and wondering what he had seen. He took a swig of warm, brackish Water from a goatskin and motioned for T'Cura to hurry.

Neb-Khot was a thin, wiry man. His dusky Stygian complexion was darkened even further by ceaseless exposure to the desert sun. His burnoose was gray with dust, secured at the waist with a leather girdle that held a scimitar and three cruelly hooked daggers. His sharp brown eyes peered questioningly at T'Cura, who scuffed over the rocky soil toward him. The Darfari approached his chieftain, touched his scarred forehead in a salute, and spoke.

"Hai, Neb-Khot, riders were approaching, but now they have turned off the Caravan Road and ride into the waste."

Neb-Khot stared at his man incredulously.

"Telmesh, awaken and tell me if what T'Cura says is truth."

The one addressed as Telmesh arose from the shadow of a mottled boulder and jogged toward the rock spur at the ridge's edge.

"I speak the truth." T'Cura's lips drew back from filed teeth.

"Are they mad?" The Stygian met T'Cura's bloodshot gaze. The Darfari was a fine tracker and an excellent man in a fight, but he had to be kept in line. Their eyes locked for a moment; then T'Cura looked away, bringing his dark hand up to scratch at his crudely shaven head.

"They ride into the open desert," persisted the Darfari, "and there are but four of them. Two are women."

"Even so?" Neb-Khot clapped a hand onto the man's shoulder to show him that he was still respected. "This grows more interesting by the moment."

The other brigands were stirring, some rising to wander over to hear of what T'Cura had seen. Telmesh dropped from the rock spur and came breathlessly up to Neb-Khot. He was a Shemite outlaw with few friends in the band. Neb-Khot often used him for simple tasks so that he felt appreciated. Now he held up his hand to shield his black eyes from the sun, revealing the faded tattoo of a golden peacock upon his forearm.

"It is as T'Cura says," declared Telmesh. "I say that we leave them be. Only sorcerers would willingly leave the Caravan Road and ride into the desert."

"Two are women," said T'Cura again, and a murmur of approval swept the lawless band of men gathered atop the rocky ridge.

"I did not notice," said Telmesh, but his words were lost in the growing tumult of eager voices. Neb-Khot lifted his hands for silence.

"My brothers, what manner of travelers leave the Caravan Road to wander in the wastelands? Are they necromancers seeking wisdom amongst the sand and scrub? Or are they witless fools who know nothing of the desert and have made the last mistake of their useless lives?"

Bloodthirsty cries rose from the men, some of whom drew their swords and shook them at the hot, blue sky. Telmesh the Shemite looked dismayed, but held his tongue.

"And eagle-eyed T'Cura says that two of the four are women!" continued Neb-Khot, his voice rising. "So I say, if the women are ugly, perhaps they are ladies worth ransoming. And if they are comely, then we have been lonely men for far too long!"

A savage cheer rang in the bright air and the group turned as one to their horses. Neb-Khot hoisted himself into his saddle and nudged his mount to Telmesh's side. An extended hand helped the Shemite mount his roan.

"Courage," smiled the Stygian. "If they are beauties, I shall see that you get first pick." Telmesh nodded, loyalty burgeoning in his breast.

Neb-Khot reined his horse around, watching his men move into action and reflecting upon how his luck had never deserted him. It had made him the undisputed leader of this strong band of bandits, always kept him a step ahead of the Stygian militia, and seen to it that it was never too long between hapless travelers on the Caravan Road. He spurred forward.

Hooves thundered in the dust as twelve men swept down from the high ridge to rob and rape and slay.

## ***Chapter Twenty-Two***

After the gear in the saddlebags of their camels was sorted through and divided, each member of the party acquired a measure of protection against the desert heat. Zelandra and Neesa immediately made use of a pair of cotton cowls, pulling them over their traveling clothes and tugging up the loose hoods against the sun. Predictably, Conan and Heng-Shih had more difficulty. The Khitan found nothing that he could wear as it was meant to be worn, finally wrapping a gray silk tunic around his shaven skull in a crude turban. For an outer garment he produced from his own provisions a golden kimono embroidered with writhing dragons of scarlet silk. Though adequately protected from the harsh sun, he cut an odd figure. The Cimmerian was luckier, finding a cotton burnoose large enough to be serviceable if not entirely comfortable. In motley array, the party moved through an empty landscape, the dry and barren miles passing slowly beneath their camels' feet.

Zelandra seemed unwell. Again and again she looked back over her shoulder toward the road they had left behind, her face pale within the folds of her hood. When she spoke to Conan, her voice had developed an

unsettling tremor.

"Are you certain that we should have left the Caravan Road? Shall we not become lost in this godforsaken waste?"

Conan shrugged his broad shoulders beneath the undersized Stygian burnoose. "The Dragon's Spine is not so easily found. It is near Pteion, remember, and no human road leads to that cursed ruin."

Lady Zelandra's left hand fluttered to her brow and she swayed slightly in the saddle. "And how am I to trust you, barbarian? How is it that I trust you to lead me through this hot and empty hell?"

The Cimmerian turned to fasten his probing gaze on her face. Zelandra's eyes rolled as though she were in the grip of a tropical fever and her jaw worked spasmodically. He saw that she gripped the box at her girdle with such fierce intensity that the tendons stood out rigidly across the back of her hand. Then Heng Shih was riding at their side. The Khitan leaned from his mount and caught the reins of Zelandra's camel. The party drew up short in the midst of the rocky plain. The sun was so bright that its rays seemed to thicken the air, suffocating the travelers with its heat.

"Heng Shih," sobbed Zelandra, teetering in her seat. "Heng Shih, where are you?" The Khitan moved his mount in close beside the sorceress and laid a thick arm across her shaking shoulders. The woman half fell against his body, leaning against him while a series of visible shudders coursed through her slender frame. Conan drew back, casting a glance at Neesa.

"Crom," he murmured, "is she stricken?"

Neesa shook her dark head. "Her body cries for the lotus."

The barbarian cursed under his breath, feeling a creeping chill despite the cruel sun. He turned away from the little group, scanning the land around them. The ruddy, irregular plain was broken only by a rough ridge to their rear and by a widely separated group of eroded volcanic buttes before them. The wind rose from a dull whisper to a hot howl, drowning Zelandra's sobs. Conan looked back to the ridge behind them, where it rose sharply against the featureless blue of the desert sky. His brow furrowed.

Heng Shih's hands pulled the silver box from its leather bindings and

lifted the lid with gentle care. Within the box's mirrored silver rim lay velvety green shadow. Zelandra tossed her head back against the Khitan's breast, tears bright on her pallid cheeks.

"No, Heng Shih," she said weakly. "No, my love."

The Khitan put a blunt forefinger in his mouth, then thrust it into the open box. It came back out encrusted with emerald dust. He put it to Zelandra's lips.

"Riders!" The barbarian's voice rang with deadly urgency. "Bandits or worse. Follow me!"

Heng Shih carefully re-wrapped the silver box and fastened it securely to Zelandra's belt before looking up. Neesa wheeled about, standing in her stirrups to look behind them. The Lady Zelandra was shaking her head as though shrugging off a spell of dizziness. She wiped away the moisture on her cheeks, blinking quickly and suddenly seeming to focus once more on those around her. When she looked up, her gray eyes were clear.

"Derketo's loins," she cursed hoarsely, "listen to the barbarian."

"Crom and Mitra! Follow me or we're all food for the jackals!" Without looking to see if they heeded his words, Conan urged his camel to a loping gallop. He started off at an angle to their original path, heading toward the stony prominence of the nearest butte. The rest of the party followed.

Neesa stared back at the ridge a moment longer. A thin thread of rising dust was just visible, tracing a line down the ridge's rugged slope. How the barbarian had noticed this faint sign was beyond her. Marveling, she lashed her camel and started off after her companions.

The party, moving at top speed, drew nearer to the closest of the buttes, and Zelandra found herself questioning the wisdom of the Cimmerian's path. The butte they approached was the core of an eons-dead volcano, a huge, crumbling shaft of stone that rose almost vertically from the desert floor. Its base was cluttered with shattered boulders torn from the main body of the escarpment by the slow claws of erosion. There seemed to be little advantage in taking refuge among the jagged heaps of broken rock. Would they leave their camels and try to lose their pursuers by hiding in the jumble of boulders? Better to try to fight them off. Zelandra's hand sought and gripped the box that bounced at her hip. She breathed deeply

of the wind that lashed her flowing cowl and cleared her mind in preparation for strong and deadly sorcery.

But Conan did not lead the party directly into the butte's base. He kept his camel galloping around the tower of stone, moving west and north until a new feature of the rock unveiled itself. This side of the butte was cleft by a narrow gorge. It was as though an angry god had split the stone with a titanic ax, opening a steep passage up into the body of the butte. Conan rode into the gorge's mouth, dismounting almost immediately as the ground became covered with loose stone. The rest of the party came up behind him and followed suit.

"We can take the high ground here. Lead your mounts; the footing is uncertain." The barbarian's words echoed in the stony passage.

. They hastily moved up the gorge, over gravel and broken, treacherous plates of reddish rock, between looming walls of striated stone. The sun shone directly down into the steep cleft in the butte, filling it with oppressive heat and blinding light. Halfway up the little canyon their passage was almost blocked by a huge boulder.

"Get the camels up behind the rock," directed Conan. "We can hold this position until they're willing to bargain."

As Heng Shih, Zelandra, and Neesa led their mounts to shelter behind the boulder, the hammer of hooves echoed up from the gorge's mouth. The brigands had overtaken them and now moved to seal off the canyon.

Neb-Khot was displeased with the current course of events. His band's fresh horses had caught up with their prey's weary camels easily enough, but the bandit chieftain had not anticipated that they would find such a dangerous place to go to ground. The brigands could only get at the travelers by charging up the open slope. Even though there were only two warriors in the defending party, he might well lose several men before taking them down. A bit of bargaining might lower their guard, perhaps even intimidate them into throwing down their arms and surrendering. He rubbed his stubbled chin uncertainly. The little party had proved surprisingly skillful in protecting themselves thus far. The Stygian sighed, wondering what other surprises they might have for him. This was not as easy as he had anticipated, but it did not mean that his luck had deserted him.

The brigands dismounted, forming a loose phalanx facing up the passage. Neb-Khot motioned for the two archers to take up flanking positions on each wall of the gorge and called Telmesh to him. The Shemite, black eyes bright with excitement, clutched his naked scimitar and looked to his leader in anticipation.

"Telmesh, how would you like to bargain with these fools?"

"I?" The bandit seemed stunned. "By the Steel Wings, I've never done such a thing."

"Bah," said Neb-Khot with friendly derision. "You underestimate yourself. Have a word with the dogs. Show them that we can be reasonable men while I ready the others to charge." He turned away before the Shemite could respond.

Up the gorge, Conan. appeared atop the boulder sheltering the camels while Heng Shih stepped out beside it. The Khitan moved a few steps down the slope, finding a niche in the rock wall that would afford cover from arrows. Conan stood in full view, black mane whipping in the hot wind that blew along the canyon.

Forty paces away, Telmesh leapt up on a block of stone and hailed him.

"Ho, travelers! Throw down your weapons, give us your goods, and we shall spare you!" The Shemite's voice rang strongly in the corridor of stone, and he straightened with pride at the sound of it. Conan's response was a harsh bark of laughter.

"We have no riches, dogs. Our mistress seeks medicinal herbs in the desert. We have nothing for you but steel. Come forward if you wish a taste of it."

At this the archers to either side of the gorge surreptitiously set shafts to string and looked to Neb-Khot for the order to loose them. The Stygian chieftain moved among the eight men on the gorge's floor, speaking to them in low tones.

Neesa struggled up onto the boulder's top beside the barbarian. As she stood, a gust of wind lifted her cowl, exposing her slim legs to the crowd below. A raucous cry of approval swept the bandits.



Telmesh laughed coarsely. "By Ashtoreth, give us a taste of her and you can all go free!"

As Conan turned to admonish Neesa to take cover, the woman's hand darted to her nape in a motion that the barbarian knew all too well. Her arm snapped forward, sending a throwing dagger streaking down the gorge like a diving hawk. The blade drove into Telmesh's throat just above the collar of his dusty burnoose.

"Taste that!" shouted Neesa as Neb-Khot gave his archers the order to release. Conan swept out an arm, shoving Neesa from the top of the boulder and sending her skidding, cursing, down the far side. An arrow shot through the space where she'd stood, whistling up the gorge. The Cimmerian's sword licked out, clipping a second arrow aside in mid-flight. The eight men on the canyon's floor howled out a wild, discordant war cry and drove forward with blades bared.

Telmesh stood still on his rock, eyes wide with disbelief.

His hands groped for the dagger's hilt and found it just as his legs gave way beneath him.

Neb-Khot watched the Shemite fall and felt his luck running strong within him. The whim that had led him to avoid bargaining with this party had likely saved his life. Surely the gods protected him this day.

Behind the boulder, the Lady Zelandra heard the cries of the attacking bandits as an indistinct and distant murmur. She knelt in the gravel, her entire being focused upon the open box of Emerald Lotus perched in her lap. Inside the mirror-lined casket was a small seashell. She used it to spoon a bit of the deep-green powder into her mouth, pouring it under her tongue. Revulsion at the sharp, bitter taste was swiftly eclipsed by the shudder of raw power through her body. She snapped the box closed, lashed it to her belt, and stood up.

The first bandit up the slope closed on Heng Shih, who lunged from his niche in the rock wall to meet him. The flare-bladed scimitar flashed in the desert sun, driving down to rebound from the bandit's hasty block with a resounding metallic clang. T'Cura reeled back from the strength of the blow, his dark face twisting with determination. He moved back in, but this time Heng Shih's swing had all the power of the Khitan's body behind it. Again, T'Cura succeeded in blocking the stroke, but the sheer

impact lifted him from his feet and hurled him backward down the gorge. The Darfari crashed to the ground, tumbling down the rocky incline in a series of painful somersaults. Heng Shih ducked back into his sheltering niche as an arrow splintered against the canyon wall beside him.

Another arrow shot past Conan's head as he dropped to a crouch, waiting for the oncoming bandits to climb the boulder to reach him. A moment later a bearded brigand pulled himself up to where the rock adjoined the wall of the gorge. Conan drove forward and met an arrow fired by a canny archer below. The point impacted the barbarian's left shoulder, failing to pierce his mail but delivering a powerful buffet that staggered him and sent pain flaring hotly down his arm. The climbing bandit came sword-first onto the boulder's top, where Conan, struck off balance by the arrow, lashed out at him with a wordless cry of rage. The Cimmerian's blade tore across the breast of his foe, splitting his ribs and slamming him back over the boulder's lip. The brigand fell from sight with a hoarse cry as Conan's uncontrolled swing drove his sword against the gorge wall, where it broke with a brittle crack. Cursing sulphurously, he tore his dagger from his belt, crouching low again as yet another arrow whispered past.

In the cover of his niche, Heng Shih gripped his hilt with both hands and prepared to go back out onto the slope to deal with the next set of attackers to struggle up the slope. His slanted eyes flew wide as the Lady Zelandra came from behind the sheltering boulder and strode boldly out in front of it. He hurtled from the niche, golden kimono billowing out behind him, to protect his mistress. He cut down a howling brigand with a single brutal stroke, sending the man flying back among his comrades and momentarily arresting their progress. Then the Khitan looked to Zelandra and froze in place.

The Lady Zelandra's hair blew back from her straining face. Her eyes stretched wide, lit up from within by a weird crimson light. A tortured stream of strange words poured from her lips as she flung her arms out as though to embrace the oncoming bandits.

Every man in the gorge stopped moving. They stared in horror at the sorceress as a fiery illumination gathered and seethed about her outstretched hands. Halfway down the slope, T'Cura turned to run.

*"Heeyah Vramgoth Dew!"* screamed Zelandra, her voice rising to a wail of supernatural intensity. *"Aie Vramgoth Cthugua!"*

A towering sheet of red-orange flame rose Up before her, filling the gorge from wall to wall, obscuring Zelandra and her comrades from the bandits. For an instant it stood still, raging like the blaze at the heart of a volcano; then it rolled down the canyon toward Neb-Khot's terror-stricken band. Men turned to flee and were caught in the roaring inferno like insects in a brush fire. Screams of fearful agony were half heard above the flame-wall's thunder.

Neb-Khot was astride his horse the moment that Zelandra began her chant. He tried to spur away, but his horse shied, its hooves slipping on the loose stone of the gorge's floor. The beast fell, sending the Stygian chieftain flying from its back to slide gracelessly down the slope. He dragged himself to his feet, twisting an ankle in the gravel, and ran as if hell were at his heels.

Conan stood on the boulder's crest, watching the flame-wall move away. It rolled swiftly toward the mouth of the gorge, expanding and contracting to fill the defile. When it reached the end of the little canyon, it faded swiftly from view. The fearsome, ear-filling roar dwindled away to silence. The barbarian saw that three bandits had escaped the gorge and now rode intently away from the butte. Two of the men shared a single mount. None turned to look behind them.

Six brigands lay dead on the floor of the canyon. Their bodies were twisted and contorted as though they had died in terrible pain. There was not a mark upon any of them.

Conan clenched his jaw, feeling the barbarian's instinctive fear of the supernatural welling up in him even as his battle-hardened sensibilities rebelled at the cruel power of Zelandra's sorcery. He glanced down to where the sorceress had stood at the base of the boulder and saw that she now sat cross-legged in the dust, her head in her hands. As he looked on, Heng Shih approached Zelandra and knelt at her side, bending his head to hers.

The Cimmerian lowered himself to the boulder's edge and dropped over it, landing lightly beside the sprawled corpse of the brigand he had broken his sword in slaying. The man still clutched a scimitar. Conan took the weapon from his stiffening fingers and the leather scabbard from his bloody belt. The scimitar was of mediocre workmanship, yet its design was agreeable enough. The blade was curved, but not so much as to make it impractical for thrusting. It was not a broadsword, but it would have to

serve.

When he turned, Zelandra was standing again, embraced by Neesa. Heng Shih approached him with a wide grin, his silken kimono bright and incongruously festive in the sun. The Khitan's hands went through a quick sequence of motions, ending by seizing Conan by the upper arms and giving him a vigorous shake. The Cimmerian pulled free of the smiling Knit an.

"He gives you thanks for saving our lives," said Neesa. The Cimmerian grunted in embarrassment, looking off down the gorge. Heng Shih slapped him on the shoulder and turned back to Zelandra, who stood leaning weakly against the boulder. Her posture spoke of enormous weariness. The Khitan took her hand, and together they walked around the boulder to where the camels waited.

Neesa came to the barbarian where he stood affixing the looted sword and scabbard to his belt.

"I shouldn't have killed that man, should I?" she said. Her dark eyes sought his. "If you had time to bargain, perhaps—"

"Hell," grinned Conan, suddenly glad to be alive. "They had no intention of letting us go. You heard those dogs howl when they caught a glimpse of you. You don't think that I'd have traded you for safe passage, do you?"

"No," she said, and lifted her lips to his.

## ***Chapter Twenty-Three***

The riders allowed their horses, weary and lathered with foam, to stop and rest at the Caravan Road. Neb-Khot lowered himself awkwardly from the mount he shared with T'Cura, lit upon his twisted ankle and swore savagely.

"Yog and Erlik! That was a close thing, brothers."

T'Cura eased off his horse and stood holding the reins while the third survivor remained mounted. The third was one of the archers, his bow now in place over his right shoulder. He was a young Shemite, his shock of black hair in sharp contrast to the pale flesh of his face.

"Telmesh was right," he panted, wiping his brow with a dirty sleeve. "They weren't human. Did you see the black-haired one knock my shaft from the air?"

"Be still, Nath," groaned Neb-Khot. He gave in to the pain in his ankle and sat down heavily on the hot, hard-packed earth of the Caravan Road.

The sun, just past its median, blazed down. It was still early afternoon. The Stygian chieftain marveled that the ill-fated pursuit of the travelers and the destruction of his band had taken so little time.

"I need a horse," he declared to no one in particular.

T'Cura was drinking noisily from a waterskin, still gripping the reins of his mount with one hand. He lowered the skin and studied his chieftain in a bemused fashion. The archer, Nath, shifted nervously in his saddle, looking back out across the shimmering expanse of the desert.

"The horses scattered, Neb-Khot," said Nath. "We'll never find one for you now."

"It's a long way to Sibü's oasis. And farther still to Bel-Phar," growled T'Cura.

"Ishtar." Neb-Khot rubbed his wounded ankle gingerly. "Give some of that water to your horse, T'Cura. The beast will need it to carry us both back to Sibü's."

The Darfari said nothing. He put the waterskin to his lips and took a long, deliberate pull. Lowering it, he looked upon Neb-Khot and bared his filed teeth in a cold and mirthless smile. Then he shoved the waterskin into a saddlebag with a single contemptuous motion.

Nath's gaze moved from T'Cura to his chieftain and back again, growing ever more apprehensive. Neb-Khot noticed none of this. His fingers probed his wounded ankle while his mind dwelt on this sudden reversal of fortune. He looked up to see that the Darfari had remounted his horse and was now stroking the polished blade of his unsheathed scimitar. For the first time it occurred to Neb-Khot that his luck might have deserted him completely.

"Look!" cried Nath, his voice breaking. "A rider!"

Neb-Khot twisted around, coming to his knees on the hard road. It was true. A single horseman had come into view on the road along the far flank of the ridge. His form rippled liquidly in the haze of heat, a small black mark on the ruddy, sun-blasted landscape; but it was clear that he rode the Caravan Road alone.

"Hah," grinned Neb-Khot, getting to his feet. "The gods haven't forgotten me after all. T'Cura, bring me that fool's horse and I'll give you fifty pieces of gold."

The Darfari eyed his leader with a look of amused disbelief writ upon his dark features. Then he shook his head and spat in the dust.

"Julian must love you, Neb-Khot," he said, and spurred his horse forward, toward the approaching horseman.

The Stygian chieftain laid a hand on the lathered neck of Nath's mount as they watched T'Cura rapidly close on the lone rider.

"Should I—" began the archer.

"No," said Neb-Khot firmly. "Stay here with me and make ready an arrow." Nath did as he was told, setting a shaft to string.

As they watched, T'Cura confronted the horseman, flourishing his sword threateningly in the brilliant sunlight. The traveler's mount seemed very weary, its head hanging, but it kept plodding toward them even as T'Cura accosted its rider. The Darfari's voice rang commandingly, the words indistinct and distant but unmistakable in intent. The horseman, wrapped in a voluminous caftan, did nothing, and his mount continued unperturbed in its slow, steady gait.

Neb-Khot licked dry lips. Was the man mad?

With a furious cry, T'Cura thrust his blade at the traveler's breast. What happened next occurred with such speed that neither Nath nor Neb-Khot could immediately grasp it. The rider's left hand lashed out, literally slapping aside T'Cura's killing thrust, and then shot out to seize the Darfari by the throat. T'Cura's blade fell to the road and his horse shied away, pulling from beneath its rider and leaving him dangling at the end of an arm as rigid as the bar of a gallows.

"Mitra save us," gasped Nath.

Impossibly, the rider held T'Cura out at arm's length, kicking, and then gave him a powerful shake. The Darfari's thrashing limbs went abruptly lax, and he was released. He fell in a limp heap on the road as the horseman continued toward Neb-Khot and Nath at the same deliberate pace.

"Oh, Mitra! Mitra!" cried Nath hysterically.

"Be still!" shouted Neb-Khot, slapping the mounted man's leg. "Shoot the dog! Loose, damn it!"

The archer shook with fear, but drew and released with ease born of years' practice. The arrow flew true, slapping into the center of the rider's breast. The man lurched in his saddle with the impact, but stayed mounted. His horse maintained its leisurely gait.

"Excellent," said Neb-Khot. "Now again!"

Nath mechanically drew and loosed another arrow, which found its mark beside the first. The rider was jolted once again, but remained in the saddle as the horse came to within a dozen paces and slowed to a halt.

"Gods," breathed Neb-Khot, "what manner of man have we slain?"

Putting his bow back over a shoulder, Nath drew his scimitar and spurred forward, cautiously approaching the horseman.

Seen up close, the horse was in terrible condition. White foam dripped from slack jaws while its sides heaved in the last extremity of exhaustion. Spurs had torn bloody marks in its flanks and its legs quivered unsteadily beneath the weight of its rider. The man's appearance was obscured by his dust-caked caftan, which was nailed to his broad chest by Nath's arrows. He sat his mount with the breathless silence of the dead.

Nath's horse snorted suddenly, but the Shemite jerked at the reins, pulling it up beside the lifeless rider. The archer poked at the horseman with the point of his scimitar, thinking to shove him from the saddle.

The dead man's hand knocked aside Nath's blade and swung back around in an arc of incredible speed. A fist like the head of a mace cracked

into the side of Nath's skull, bowling him off of his horse and sending him sprawling unconscious in the dust.

The horseman swung a leg over his saddle and dismounted. Neb-Khot drew his sword without thinking. Then he was struck motionless, his limbs seeming to lock up in helpless horror. The rider had caught the reins of Nath's horse with one hand and was drawing one of the arrows out of his chest with the other. The shaft came out slowly and with a thick, grating rasp, as though it were being pulled from a wooden beam afflicted with dry rot. Bloodlessly, the arrow was removed and discarded. When the rider grasped at the second arrow, Neb-Khot's reason broke.

"Die, demon!" The Stygian chieftain stumbled forward, bringing his sword down in an overhand cut that should have cleft the crown of the rider's head. But his twisted ankle gave way beneath his weight even as the horseman sidestepped the attack. Neb-Khot fell awkwardly on the road, gravel scoring his palms as he caught himself.

There was no time to recover, to strike upward at his nemesis, or even to roll away. A knee came down solidly in the middle of Neb-Khot's back. A cold hand locked onto each shoulder, iron fingers sinking into his flesh. Struggling, the Stygian was bent backwards with monstrous, irresistible strength.

Gulbanda spoke a single word, then snapped Neb-Khot's spine.

## ***Chapter Twenty-Four***

Zelandra's band of travelers traversed the waste beneath a molten sun. Conan led them unerringly across the desert's level floor, over red earth baked by centuries of ceaseless heat until it was the consistency of brick. As the long miles passed, the stony solidity of the soil gave way to crumbling gravel, and then to shifting sand.

The party crested a low rise, and drew to a halt at the Cimmerian's command. Ahead stretched an ocean of rolling dunes, a seemingly endless expanse of ochre sand that reached for the shimmering horizon, raked by the sunlight of late morning and dappled by black shadow. A single band of cloud, burnt transparent by the sun, moved upon the blank blue slate of the sky. "Here the true desert begins," said the barbarian. "Any sane caravan would traverse the dune sea only at night, but we are in haste and have no time for comforts. Drink sparingly. I doubt I'll be able to find



another source of water until we've crossed the dunes and reached the highlands."

Zelandra bent in her saddle, digging a hand into her baggage. The sorceress produced a worn tube of pale leather, from which she drew a roll of yellowed parchment. Thrusting the tube beneath an arm, Zelandra unrolled the scroll for Conan to see.

"This is an ancient map of this part of Stygia," she explained. "I found it before we left. It dates back to the days of Old Stygia, and shows the city of Pteion and its environs. I doubt that the map will be of much use, but I noticed that it depicted an oasis near the eastern highlands. Do you think it might still be there, Conan?"

The barbarian squinted at the map, lifting a thick forearm to shade his eyes. "It may be. I have heard of an old oasis in the dune sea, though not from anyone who claimed to have seen it with his own eyes. This part of the world is wisely avoided by most. Only men who wish to travel in secrecy cross these sands." Conan nudged his camel forward, and the travelers started down the gentle slope into the dunes.

Neesa pulled her hood over her tousled locks and said, "Do the caravans fear becoming lost amid the trackless sand? Traveling by night, as you say, could they not steer by the stars?"

"They fear losing their way, as they fear the heat and the absence of water, but they also fear the slumbering sorcery of the dead city of Pteion. These sands are said to be accursed."

"We are not going near Pteion," put in Zelandra. "We shall skirt its evil rains by many miles. Your barbaric superstitions do you little credit, Conan. These sands are no more accursed than the grassy hills of Shem."

The Cimmerian made no reply. His blue eyes smoldered against his bronzed face as he scanned the horizon uneasily.

As the party rode into the sea of sand, the sun lifted into the sky and seemed to halt there, suspended in the heavens like a torch in a sconce. The camels labored over the dunes steadily, if unenthusiastically, occasionally snorting and moaning their distaste for the task.

Neesa followed Conan's example and draped herself in her cloak so that

not an inch of skin was exposed to the merciless sun. Closing her eyes against the glare, she settled back in the swaying saddle and tried to doze. Between the movement of the camel and the steady creaking of her gear, she could almost imagine herself back on the deck of Temoten's ferry. A cry from Zelandra snapped the scribe back into full awareness.

"Look there! Is that not a palm?" The sorceress stood in her stirrups at the crest of a tall dune. "Conan, is that our oasis?"

The barbarian pulled at his mount's reins, urging the camel up the dune's face until he was at Zelandra's side. Heng Shih pointed to the southeast, where a fleck of emerald glimmered in the haze of heat.

"It looks like it," agreed Conan, "though it is» nowhere near where it is shown on your map."

Zelandra's high brows knitted in impatience. "Well, one could hardly expect the oasis to be in exactly the same position after the passage of so many centuries. Let us go fill our waterskins and lounge in the shade for a time. It will do us all good."

The Cimmerian said nothing, and the travelers turned from their trail. The distant palms beckoned, wavering like a green flame on the face of the desert. Conan watched the palms draw nearer, coming into view as his camel slogged up a dune, then dropping from sight as his mount descended into the valleys between each hill of sand. Unlike his civilized companions, the barbarian had never learned to distrust or disregard his instincts. He was troubled by a vague and creeping unease.

The terrain altered as the party proceeded. The dunes flattened, and the sand became a hardened skin that crunched beneath their camels' feet! Conan stared at the oasis, now close enough for him to discern lazily swaying palms and the thick cluster of ground vegetation that marked the location of the waterhole. His nostrils flared.

"Something is amiss," said the barbarian. "The oasis appears green, yet I smell no water."

"For the love of Ishtar, Conan, would you attempt to contain your barbarian superstitions?" Zelandra sounded exasperated. "Pteion is many miles away. This oasis is a blessing that we shall not overlook. We..."

A wave of heat rolled over the travelers. Though the sky was clear, the sun brightened as if it had emerged from behind a thick wall of clouds. Ahead, the oasis blurred like a waking dream, its outlines softening in the harsh glare. The brightness made Conan squint and look down. He saw that he rode over a hardened surface of solidified sand. The sculpted dunes had flattened into an uneven plain of fused glass. The ground resembled the congealed bottom of a glass-blower's forge. Conan jerked his camel to a halt, looked up, and saw that the oasis had vanished.

Where the palms and brush had been was now a stout, flat-topped cone of dark stone, standing almost as tall as a man. Its deep gray hue contrasted sharply with the ochre tones of the desert. The sands around the cone were frozen in concentric whorls of fused glass. It sat at the center of a mile-wide spiral of seared sand, like a gray spider in a web of brittle stone. The earth around it was strewn with dark debris.

A sheet of white fire rippled across the sky, and a cry went up from the party. The camels bellowed and stumbled as the air itself seemed to turn to flame. Conan dismounted, seizing the reins of his reeling mount, and pulled away from the false oasis.

"Come away!" he roared. "Sorcery!"

The heat intensified incredibly, dazzling their eyes and searing their skin. Heng Shih and Neesa could not control their mounts. The camels reared and staggered, with their riders pulling at the reins in vain. Conan saw Zelandra jump awkwardly from her saddle and fall, rolling on the ground beside her camel's stamping feet.

"Dismount!" bellowed the barbarian. "Leave the camels and flee or we'll be cooked in our skins!" Neesa and Heng Shih tried to obey as Zelandra scrambled away from her frenzied mount. Conan moved to help her. Hell seemed to swallow them all.

Blinding white fire filled the air. Breathing scorched the lips and tongue. The Cimmerian reached for Zelandra, and saw the sleeve of his burnoose was smoldering along the full length of his arm. Blisters sprang up on the back of his exposed hand.

"No!" shouted the sorceress, "Stand away from me!" Conan stepped back, and Zelandra knelt, lifting her hands to the incandescent sky.

"*Dar-Asthkoth la Ithaqua!*" her voice wailed. "*Brykal Ithaqua Ftagn!*" The sky immediately lost much of its brilliance, and the heat waned. Conan threw back the hood of his burnoose and looked about wildly. The acrid stench of burnt cloth filled the hot, still air. Heng Shih had been hurled from his camel's back. He rose from all fours, and limped to the side of his mistress. The Khitan drew his scimitar, as if his blade might protect Zelandra from the unnatural heat. Neesa had stayed in her saddle and succeeded in calming her mount, while the remainder of the camels milled about in a state of near panic.

Above the beleaguered party arced a translucent dome of azure light. The Lady Zelandra raised her palms to it, as though holding it aloft. Her breath came in short, harsh gasps. Outside the dome's circumference, the air blazed with rippling fire. The ominous cone of gray stone wavered in and out of visibility.

"What in the name of the gods is happening?" cried Neesa. She swung her long legs over her saddle and dismounted, hastening to Conan's side. The barbarian brushed roughly at the smoking hem of her cloak, extinguishing the embers glowing there.

"Some sort of sorcerous sentinel," he rumbled, "trying to burn us to death like insects under a glass. It's a good thing that Zelandra made quick use of her power, else we might all be piles of smoking bone by now."

"Is it a weapon of Ethram-Fal's?" asked the scribe.

"No," rasped the kneeling sorceress, "it is very old. And very hungry." Her hands trembled, and a hot wind blew over the huddled group. "I can't hold it much longer. Our only hope is that it tires before I do."

"What is it?" Neesa's voice quavered. "What does it want with us?" Zelandra did not answer. She had clenched her eyes shut and was now a study in stark concentration. Heng Shih knelt beside her, putting a reassuring hand on her slim shoulder.

"I can't say what it is," said Conan, "but I can tell you that it means to slay us. Look." Neesa's gaze followed the barbarian's outstretched arm and fell upon a gruesome sight. Some twenty feet ahead of the travelers was a cluster of blackened bone, lying half-sunken into the fused glass of the desert floor. The jagged ribs of a camel were plainly visible, but more

disturbing still was a scattered collection of rounded mounds that appeared to be charred human skulls.

"The cursed thing lures travelers by shamming the appearance of an oasis, and then cooks them to death when they come to drink."

"Why?" burst out Neesa, horror edging her voice with hysteria. "Would it kill us without reason?"

"It is hungry." Zelandra spoke without opening her eyes. The face of the sorceress was tense and drawn, as though she suffered a ceaseless pain she could barely endure. "It wants to burn us to death and feast upon our released souls. My resistance has made it curious. Look to its stone well, I think that it has come out to look us over."

Conan looked, and shuddered as though a spider had scurried down his spine. The space between Zelandra's protective dome and the gray stone well had cleared somewhat. Something hung above the well's dark prominence, floating suspended in the air. It was a shimmering tower of reflective light. It looked as though the desert's common mirage of distant, glistening water had been twisted into a living coil. The demon swayed like a stationary cyclone. Conan felt the distinct and unpleasant sensation of being watched.

The air outside the dome blazed up anew. White fire pressed in upon Zelandra's magical barrier, drawing a low moan from the sorceress.

"Ah, Ishtar, but it's strong! It is some guardian demon of old, freed of its well, yet bound to its guard post. I feel its mind. It knows only hunger and hatred. Ah!" The demon's body swelled suddenly, and the blue dome above the party dimmed and lowered. A flash of infernal heat fell upon the travelers, then dissipated as Zelandra marshaled her strength. "Damn! It means to have us all. Heng Shih, get me some lotus."

The Khitan obediently unlaced the silver box from Zelandra's girdle. Tilting the lid open, he found the sea-shell within, and scooped up a bit of the deep-green powder. He held it to his mistress's face and, when she opened her mouth, poured it under her tongue.

"Derketo," Zelandra cursed, shuddering. Then a terrible smile slowly spread over her features. Her teeth were smeared with green. Above them, the azure dome rose and darkened.

"How's that, old devil?" Zelandra opened her eyes and gazed upon the swaying form of her demon nemesis. Her voice was softer, almost sensual. "You've never met anyone like me before, have you?"

The whirling coil suddenly stretched up to twice its height, shooting skyward in a flash of blue-white light. Zelandra screamed hoarsely as her protective barrier was struck with enough force to drive it down directly over their heads. Neesa cried out and dropped to her knees, involuntarily lifting her arms to shield her head. The azure dome flickered, admitting quick pulsations of fiery heat.

"I can't hold it! I can't hold it!"

"Can steel harm it?" Conan had drawn his scimitar, and crouched beside the kneeling sorceress. His eyes blazed with reckless desperation.

"Strong blows might dissipate it momentarily, but it can't be slain by physical weapons. Don't be a fool! *Ah!*" Zelandra grimaced with effort as the demon hammered at her shield with all of its eldritch might.

Conan lunged to his camel's side, and pulled a water-skin from its place beside the saddle. He tore it open, then upended the skin over his head. The Cimmerian poured water over his burnoose, trying to soak himself completely.

"Have you gone mad?" cried Neesa, grasping at the barbarian's arm. Conan shook her off.

"It's our only chance. If I can distract it, flee." Without another word the Cimmerian leapt through Zelandra's barrier into the inferno beyond. Breaking out of the azure dome, Conan felt a flash of sharp chill, as if he had splashed through an icy waterfall, then the demon's heat hit him like a toppling wall. Conan sprinted across the brittle sands with steam bursting from his sodden burnoose. It was like running across a lava flow. White light drove tears from the barbarian's eyes, but he could see the undulating coil of the demon's body ahead. He steered toward it, bounding over the blackened remains of a luckless caravan, and sliding to a stop before the gray cone of rock. It was a well of sorts. The tip of the cone was missing, revealing a shaft dropping away into darkness. A circular plate of gray stone, the size of a wagon's wheel, lay against the side of the well. The demon towered twenty feet above Conan, rising in sparkling, unbroken coils from the well's open mouth. It swung from side

to side, then drew itself down, as if to examine the diminutive form of the man who dared approach it.

Conan heard the moisture sizzling from his burnoose, and smelled hair burning. The hilt of his sword seared his palm. He lashed out at the demon with a savage cry. It was like cleaving cobwebs. His blade passed through its insubstantial form, but pulled a trail of glittering shadow-substance after it. The temperature dropped abruptly, though Conan scarcely noticed. With another war cry, he slashed his scimitar across the top of the well again, and yet again. The demon fell in upon itself, telescoping, until it stood only half a man taller than the barbarian. It bent over him, as if in benediction, and Oman's burnoose burst into flames.

The Cimmerian dropped and rolled on the hard ground, trying to smother the fire. Scorching pain bloomed along his shoulders and arms, then ceased abruptly. The flames died. Rolling onto his back, Conan saw the azure dome suspended above him. He jumped to his feet, heard the cries of his comrades, and realized that Zelandra was protecting him at their expense. The barbarian's sword" whipped across the mouth of the well again and again, shredding the demon-thing's substance, drawing its attention back to himself. It dropped lower in the well. Sorcerous heat pressed upon the azure barrier, but could not penetrate. The twisted coil of rippling light shuddered, then dropped from view into the well.

The air was suddenly much cooler, and the sun less bright. The normal, fierce heat of the desert seemed pleasantly temperate after the demon's onslaught. Conan leaned against the faceted stone wall and fought for breath, peering into the well's blackness. A surge of heat billowed up from within and dried his eyeballs.

"Seal it!" Zelandra's voice carried across the blasted sand. "It will gather its strength and come back more powerful than before!"

Conan staggered back from the well. His eyes were drawn to the heavy plate of gray stone that leaned against the well's side. He bent and gripped it. The barbarian's arms stretched to their limit, his hands fastening onto the plate's rim and clamping tight. The great disk of stone had been carved, worked, and fashioned to cap the well. Weird runes, half obliterated by time, rose beneath his straining fingers. Conan heaved up, muscles cracking in his mighty frame. The breath exploded from between his teeth. Balancing the massive plate against his heaving breast, the

Cimmerian took a single, unsteady step, and the demon thrust itself from the well again.

The shimmering body of the creature shed a hellish heat and rose, resembling a cyclone of broken mirrors. With a convulsive heave, Conan dropped the lid. It fell across the well's mouth with a hollow boom, like distant thunder. The demon's body was lopped off cleanly. Its upper, half dissipated like smoke on the wind, its luster fading rapidly to shadow. The stone lid rattled once, as if thrust up from within; then it was still.

Conan slumped against the well, drawing breaths that seemed as sweet as the wine of Kyros. His comrades joined him, stumbling across the fused sand.

"Get away from the well," snapped Zelandra. "I'll seal its bonds with magic." The sorceress muttered a brief incantation, then slapped her palms down on the well's cap. The plate of stone glowed a dusky, auroral blue, and a faint keening sound pained Conan's ears. Zelandra turned from the well with a triumphant grin.

"Congratulations, my friends. We have defeated a guardian demon that has haunted this desert since Acheron warred with Old Stygia." The lady's face was pinched with strain, yet lit by an unnatural energy. She clutched her silver box of Emerald Lotus, gesturing with it. "Our barbarian friend was right again. We must learn to cease underestimating him. That was a creature of Pteion, set to guard its borders more than thirty centuries ago. I could feel its age as I grappled with it. It has a mind of sorts, and intelligence. If only I could stay and study it. What wonders the demon must have known in its youth."

Conan doffed his blackened burnoose, baring flesh scorched scarlet. Wordlessly, he began rummaging through the pack camel's provisions, looking for new clothing. The barbarian shot a glance at Heng Shih, and smiled. The Khitan had lost his turban when he fell from his camel, and now his pate was reddened and dotted with angry blisters. His golden kimono was worn, dirty, and bore spots of black char. He noticed the Cimmerian's attention and grimaced, touching his blistered scalp ruefully.

"Can it get but of the well now?" asked Neesa.

"No, child," said Zelandra grandly. "My power has sealed the demon away until I see fit to set it free. Originally, all one had to do was open the



well to release it, but I have fused the stone with sorcery. Go ahead, Conan, just try to lift the lid now. Even you shan't be able to do it. Ga on. Try it."

"I believe you, milady," said Conan dryly, continuing his search through the provisions.

"But it got out of the well before," murmured Neesa dubiously.

"Some fool must have lifted the lid," said Zelandra. "Probably many years ago, though there is no sure way to tell. Pteor knows why anyone would do such a thing."

"Probably looking for treasure. The poor devils must have thought they had found a Stygian tomb." The Cimmerian finally found another burnoose in a saddlebag, and pulled it over his stinging shoulders. It was too small, but it would have to do.

"They found their deaths. As we might have if not for my lotus." Zelandra examined her silver box with pride.

"And Conan's courage," said Neesa.

"Yes. Yes, of course," said the sorceress absently. She opened the silver box and stared within. Zelandra's eyes grew vague and distant. She licked her lips slowly. Her right hand seemed to rise of its own accord, stroking gently around the box's silver-chased rim.

Neesa snatched the box from her mistress's hands, snapping it shut. The scribe backed away from the sorceress, holding the box behind her body. Her posture revealed fear and determination in equal measures.

"That's mine!" Zelandra snarled, her hands clenching into fists. "Give it back to me, or I'll..." Her gaze abruptly focused upon the slender form of her scribe. Their eyes met, and Zelandra's face fell. Bewildered, she looked down at her hands and deliberately unclenched her fists.

"Forgive me, Neesa. You are a fine servant and a better friend. Forgive me." The voice of the sorceress was husky and halting.

"It is nothing, milady," said Neesa softly. "Here." The scribe handed her mistress the silver box, and Zelandra fastened it securely at her girdle, knotting it into place.

"Come then," the sorceress spoke up. "Let us mount and be off. I shall busy myself, as we travel, making a salve to soothe our burns. Lead on, Conan."

The barbarian rejoined his mount and swung into the saddle. His dark face was grim. As the little caravan began its slow crawl across the burning sands, he trained all his senses upon a single object. The Cimmerian had poured much of the party's water supply over his body to protect himself from the supernatural heat of the guardian demon. There was little left. Conan sniffed the air and scanned the landscape, searching for any evidence of a water source. If he did not find the oasis depicted upon Zelandra's ancient map, he had no doubt that the party would perish for lack of water.

## ***Chapter Twenty-Five***

Except for a single chair and several empty buckets, the little room was devoid of furnishings. These few things sat in a rough circle around the room's central feature. In the middle of the smooth stone floor was a deep depression now filled with hot water. In this impromptu tub lounged the naked form of Ethram-Fal. The steaming water was dark and thick as syrup with powdered Emerald Lotus. The sorcerer wallowed on his back in the sunken pool, his slight, wizened body half floating as he breathed the perfumed air through flaring nostrils and stared upward with dilated eyes. He leaned his shaven head back upon the sharp rim of the tub and idly created visions to amuse himself. Suspended in the air above his prone form, a silver flower bloomed, its shining petals gleaming like polished steel. It rotated a moment and then burst into a compact ball of scarlet fire. The flame blazed brightly, then flew outward into a thousand separate pinpoints that immediately contracted, spinning into a miniature galaxy. The revolving disk of brilliant motes coalesced, gradually outlining the tiny, perfect form of a woman. Once complete, the fiery homunculus began to whirl in a wild dance, slowly shedding its flames until it was a diminutive but perfect image of the Lady Zelandra. Naked, the little figure writhed in erotic abandon before Ethram-Fal's greedy eyes.

The sorcerer settled himself more deeply in the hot, lotus-laden water, feeling its power seeping into his bones. Above him, the homunculus caressed itself and thrust tiny hands out to Ethram-Fal in shameless supplication. Then, as he looked on, the figure began to tear at itself,

rending its flesh with its own hands until it burst abruptly into a misty cloud of crimson droplets.

Ethram-Fal laughed, his mirth sounding metallic and inhuman in the closed stone room. The sorcerer rolled over, letting the image wink out, and turned his mind to more serious things.

He slouched low, letting the thickened water creep up to his lower lip, allowing a bit to slip into his mouth and savoring the bitter bite of it.

His continuing study of Cetriss's legendary discovery had taught him much about it, but had left him curious on a number of key points. Most notably, he had no idea how it had been conceived. It had no place in nature. The Emerald Lotus was a unique hybrid of plant and predatory fungi. Ethram-Fal believed that he now understood each distinctive stage in its odd life cycle. Thinking to feed it again before it went dormant, he had his soldiers drive a horse over the balcony railing and into the pit. It had taken six men with spears to do the job, and one of them had received a kick that stove in his ribs. The horse had fallen beside the lotus, which had remained motionless until sensing the blood from the beast's wounds. The lotus could be approached at any time, and its blossoms harvested, provided that it did not smell blood. Exactly how it sensed blood he had yet to determine, but a few moments after the horse, wounded by prodding spearpoints, had landed at its side, the lotus had become violently animate, leaping on the beast and feeding upon it. After nearly draining the animal, it bloomed once again, the newer, brighter flowers almost obscuring the ones left unharvested from the pony that he and Ath had given it. Disturbingly, the lotus had seemed less than satisfied with its second horse, and continued to move about the chamber after flowering. Ethram-Fal wondered if it was possible to give the Emerald Lotus too much sustenance. Its appetite seemed limitless, and the blood it consumed added to its size and strength no matter how much it had already absorbed. The sorcerer had stared down into the cylindrical chamber and realized it would be as foolhardy to overfeed the lotus as it would be to starve it. The Emerald Lotus had to be kept alive and thriving, yet if overfed it might prove difficult to manage. The sorcerer had watched it continue to move after its feeding for almost an hour. The lotus prowled around the walls in a restless circle, dragging the body of the horse with it.

It never gave up its victims. They became a part of it, woven into its grisly fabric. The lotus was bigger now, a tangled mass of hardened

branches, razor thorns, and lush, emerald blossoms. The nightmare plant now stood at nearly the height of a man, and fairly blanketed the floor of its chamber. Ethram-Fal knew that, in time, the blooms would dry out and fall away, leaving the bristling bulk of the lotus in a dormant state as it waited patiently for nourishment. Left even longer without blood, it would use the bones of its prey to go to seed, driving black spores into the marrow and letting its outer body fall slowly to dust.

It was fascinating, but frustrating as well. Though he now believed that he knew the lotus and how to control it, he had not developed even a tentative theory as to how Cetriss had created it. Even a sorcerer as skilled and knowledgeable in the ways of growing things as himself could not begin to imagine how such an unnatural conglomeration of plant, animal, and fungus could have been formed. To have created such a thing and have it live for mere moments in the laboratory would have been a triumph; that it was nearly immortal and yielded a powerful drug was practically beyond belief.

Ethram-Fal sat up in the tub, the water making green tracers over his bare shoulders. He mopped his brow and blinked in the steamy heat. Perhaps the legends were right. Perhaps Cetriss had bargained with the Dark Gods for the lotus. If this was so, then the sorcerer had been a man of great courage as well as great skill. If this was so, then all his own efforts to fit the Emerald Lotus into earthly categories were doomed from the start. It might have been conceived in a place where the laws of nature as men knew them did not exist. Under what strange skies had the Emerald Lotus first blossomed? And who had been the first to harvest it?

Thinking on the accomplishments of Cetriss, Ethram-Fal felt an unaccustomed surge of admiration. No wonder the mage had abandoned all to seek immortality. His greatness had been such that all the brilliant sorcerers of Old Stygia must have seemed little more than insects in comparison. A man like that would have wanted the ages, the god-like power to rise above the paltry world of men.

Ethram-Fal sighed deeply. He, too, wanted the ages, but he would settle for power over the here and now. The lotus had already enhanced his abilities far beyond his expectations and promised to make him stronger still. To seven scarlet hells with its origins as long as he could continue to harvest its blossoms.

The Stygian slouched back in the tub's warm embrace, eyes slitted and

glittering. He could wait a while to feed it now. Next time it shouldn't be a horse. That had proved to be much too difficult. Ethram-Fal thought of the soldier who had been kicked and had his ribs broken, of how he now lay so uselessly in the Great Chamber. The sorcerer smiled.

Heavy footfalls in the hall outside the room woke him from his pleasant reverie. The blanket hanging over the doorway was thrust roughly aside, and Ath came panting into the room.

"Milord, I beg—" the tall soldier began.

"What is this? Did I not leave explicit orders that I was not to be disturbed?" Ethram-Fal sat up in his bath, a small, shrunken, and naked form that filled the armored warrior with a fear that jellied his guts.

"Milord, please, I would not have come here without reason."

There was a moment's silence while Ethram-Fal thought on this. The yellow-green illumination of the light-globe played along Ath's rangy form, highlighting the nervous tic that leapt beneath his right eye.

"No," said Ethram-Fal finally, "I suppose that you wouldn't. Speak. What is it?"

A lungful of air escaped from Ath's lips and he realized that he had been holding his breath. A hand went involuntarily to his cheek to quell the tic there.

"There is something that you must see, milord. One of the men has been killed."

"What? How?"

"Please, you must see for yourself, milord. It was one of the guards. He was found in the room of the great statue."

At that Ethram-Fal was up and out of his bath, scrubbing at his scrawny body with a towel and quickly struggling into his gray robes. He was following Ath down the stone hallway in mere moments, his bare feet leaving damp prints in the dust. They did not speak again until they came into the huge, circular chamber.

A soldier stood at the base of the black statue, thrusting his light-globe feebly at the encroaching darkness. He stared silently at them as they approached. Ethram-Fal hardly noticed the living man at first, his eyes were fixed upon the smooth block of stone between the god-thing's extended paws.

A man lay spread-eagle there, his head close to the black sphinx's glossy breast. His arms and legs were thrown out to each corner of the smoothly worn block, where black rings of untarnished metal were set in the stone. He was not bound. There was a ragged hole in his chest, piercing the mail. Bright blood spattered the sable stone in loops and strings. It pooled, cooling, beneath the body. The featureless oval of the sphinx's face hung above them like a black moon in the darkness, admitting nothing.

"What in Set's name?" Ethram-Fal's voice was a dry croak.

"It is Dakent, milord." Ath's tones were steady and emotionless. "He was on guard with Phandoros when it happened."

Ethram-Fal's gaze fixed on the man with the light-globe, and the slender Stygian flinched as if stabbed. He did not, however, speak until spoken to.

"What happened? How did your partner come to this?"

Phandoros licked his lips and spoke in a reedy voice. "It grew chill in the courtyard, milord. It was nearly dawn and a wind came up the canyon. I left Dakent alone at the portal to go and fetch my cloak. I found it, took a sip of wine, and returned to find him gone." Phandoros hesitated, swallowing audibly.

"What then?" urged Ethram-Fal impatiently.

"I called for him in the courtyard, then came back in to seek him inside. When I didn't find him, I woke Captain Ath and we searched the palace together. When we came to this room..." The soldier's voice choked off and he seemed unable to go on.

Ethram-Fal turned to his captain, "Ath, continue."

"Outside this room, we heard a voice."

"A voice? Who spoke?" The sorcerer held his hands at his waist, knotting and unknotting his fingers distractedly.

"I don't know, milord. We came in at the far entrance and heard the voice whispering. He spoke no words that I understood. When we lifted our lights and called out, whoever it was fled. We could hear his feet on the stone. We gave chase but hesitated when we saw Dakent. By the time that we started after the intruder again, he had escaped out the portal."

"It's gone? You're sure it left the palace?"

"Positive, milord. I followed outside and heard the sounds of him climbing the canyon wall."

"Climbing that sheer wall?"

"Yes, milord."

"Does anyone else know of this?" demanded Ethram-Fal.

"No, milord. Everyone else sleeps," said Ath.

"Good. No one else shall hear of it. All shall know that Dakent was bitten by an adder while on watch and that his body was given to the lotus. Is that understood?"

"Yes, milord," said Ath.

"Phandoros?"

"Y-yes, milord. It is understood."

The small group of men stood in grim silence for a brief time. The light-globe shed its gently wavering illumination over the sprawled body, lending it the ghastly illusion of movement, while the shadows seemed to press inward and hold the living in place.

"Why didn't he cry out?" asked Phandoros in a small voice.

"Look at his throat," said Ethram-Fal. "His windpipe has been crushed shut."

"You mean he was seized, silenced, and dragged in here to be slain?"

Ath's voice rose in repugnance and horror.

"Yes," said Ethram-Fal in softer tones. "And where is his heart?"

The two soldiers started and looked about themselves as if they might find the organ that had given Dakent life lying at their feet.

But it was gone.

## ***Chapter Twenty-Six***

An ancient lean-to of dry sticks and faded camel-skin tatters waved in the hot desert breeze. It sat forlorn and fallen in upon itself at the base of one of several palms that stood about the oasis like sentries swaying with weariness in the heat. The trees threw inviting splotches of dark shadow upon the sun-bright sand, but the eyes of the weary travelers were fixed on the pool.

Sunken into a sandy depression and half surrounded by grateful shrubs, the water gleamed a vivid blue, reflecting the cloudless sky above.

"Now that, by Crom, is a most welcome sight." Conan slid easily from his camel's back and led the others toward the pool's nearest shore. His three comrades followed, stretching legs aching from hours in the saddle.

"Is the oasis where the map showed it to be?" Neesa pulled back her hood and shook out her tangled cloud of black hair. The scribe wondered if she could be patient enough to wait until everyone drank their fill before throwing herself headlong into the waterhole.

"More or less," said Conan. "I steered us by the map until I could smell water, then followed the scent."

Zelandra jogged to Conan's side, her silver-threaded hair bouncing with her movements. As they neared the pool's rim, her hand closed on his thick shoulder.

"Hold," she said urgently. "Something here is not right..."

Conan's eyes caught a trace of movement in the pool's clear shallows. A thin stream of bubbles rippled from a spot in the sand beneath the water. The stream widened as he watched, sending tiny concentric swells rolling across the still surface of the pool. Heng Shih and Neesa shouldered up to



where Zelandra and Conan stood staring. The barbarian's skin crawled with a dread so strong and insistent that it was almost a premonition.

"Get back!" he bellowed as an explosive concussion ripped the surface of the pool, hurling white spray far up into the empty sky. Where the stream of bubbles had emerged from the pool's floor, a thick shaft of shining green, like the trunk of a tree, now thrust itself into view. It shook, jerked, and stretched itself taller than a man, lashing the water to froth. A cluster of pale, bloated, petal-like growths covered the thing's crown. Its body was a densely wrinkled green cylinder, crisscrossed with pulsing veins. A pair of ridged tentacles burst from each side of its midsection, lashing the air. A thick mass of roiling roots formed its base, heaving at the pool's floor, lifting the grotesque thing up out of the water, moving it toward the shore and the stunned human intruders.

A whiplike tentacle whistled toward Conan, snapping itself around his right calf. It pulled forward with incredible strength, jerking his leg up, upending the barbarian's body, so that for a moment he was suspended head down. The Cimmerian's sword leapt into his hands, making a flashing arc that slashed through the hard, ridged arm and dropped him to the sand.

Heng Shih's hands caught Zelandra's waist and tossed her forcefully back. She stumbled out of range even as a tentacle curled around her bodyguard's torso. The emerald arm constricted, sinking sharply into Heng Shih's abdomen, drawing him in toward the hideous thing.

Conan sprang cat-like up off the ground, ducking beneath one flailing tentacle as another struck him across neck and chest like a slavemaster's whip. He twisted away, stumbling in the sand, a line of dripping crimson bright on his bronzed throat.

The unnatural plant proceeded to pull itself out of the pool on its tangled carpet of roots while bone-white thorns began sprouting from the net of wrinkles on its swaying trunk. Wicked, needle-sharp spikes pushed into view, jutting the length of a man's hand. The unladen tentacles lengthened, whipping wildly about as the one gripping Heng Shih pulled steadily, tirelessly at him.

The Cimmerian lunged to his friend's aid. A questing tentacle writhed about the barbarian's left arm, biting into muscle and spoiling a stroke meant to free Heng Shih. The tentacle he had severed snaked clumsily

between Conan's legs, seeking an ankle.

The Khitan's boots plowed twin furrows in the sandy soil as he was drawn irresistibly toward the thing. The tentacle sawed through his kimono and into his midsection, sending trickles of brilliant scarlet across golden silk. Clinging to the imprisoning appendage with one hand, Heng Shih managed to draw out his scimitar with the other.

The plant-thing, now well up onto the shore, gave a sudden heave on the tentacle grasping the Khitan. Heng Shih lost his footing and stumbled helplessly forward, toward the thing's body, which now bristled with dagger-like thorns. He made a desperate thrust with his scimitar, and the point of his blade pierced the trunk's thick skin with a moist crunch. The Khitan's body jolted to a stop as he braced the pommel of the sword against his belly. To draw him closer, the monstrosity would be forced to drive his blade deeper into its own body. The length of his scimitar was all that kept Heng Shih from being pulled onto the murderous thorns.

Conan stomped the wounded tentacle into the sand while pulling against the horror gripping his arm. It jerked to and fro in a frenzy, confounding his efforts to hack himself free.

The ghastly thing kept inching forward, thick petals bobbing in the sunlight. Then it leaned back and gave another tremendous heave, nearly unbalancing Conan and driving half the length of Heng Shih's scimitar into its fibrous body. In the instant that it righted itself, the tension on its tentacles went slack and Conan moved. He staggered up to the abomination and, with a swift whirl of steel, struck off at the base the tentacle that gripped his arm. The appendage released him and dropped, writhing in the sand like a maddened serpent. The wounded tentacle, freed from beneath Conan's boot, finally found the Cimmerian's ankle just as the last free tentacle snapped around Heng Shih's chest and added its relentless pressure to that already drawing the Khitan onto the spiked trunk. The ridged arm around Conan's ankle constricted with savage force and wrenched the Cimmerian away from the creature he had wounded. Conan fell heavily on his side and was pulled away, cursing and struggling.

Heng Shih's face was fixed in a grimace of agony as he bore up under the monstrous pressure exerted by the remorseless tentacles. His hands were white on the hilt of his sword, clinging doggedly to the only thing that kept him from embracing the nightmare plant's spined trunk. The pommel of his scimitar thrust painfully against his belly even as his blade

slid an inch deeper into the monster's dense, wooden flesh.

Then a knife hurtled from nowhere, thudding into the horror's emerald trunk a handbreadth from Heng Shih's face. Neesa's aim was as true as ever; but if the sorcerous abomination perceived her marksmanship, it gave no sign.

The tentacle dragging Conan away from the fray suddenly released him and flew back to whip with vicious force around Heng Shih's shoulders. The breath was driven from the Khitan's lungs. The plant-thing was willfully impaling itself upon his blade in order to draw him to it. Heng Shih's scimitar was slowly being driven hilt-deep into its trunk, and now he held himself mere inches above the hungry thorns.

The Cimmerian leapt up and sprang back into the fray. Skidding to a halt in the damp sand, he braced his feet and delivered a terrific roundhouse cut to the plant-thing's body, hewing almost a third of the way through the trunk like a woodsman chopping a tree.

Colorless fluid gushed from the yawning wound, spraying Conan's arms and face. Its blood was cool and, where it touched the barbarian's lips, tasteless. It was water. Realization translated into instantaneous action. Conan hurled himself away from the thing even as the wounded tentacle released its grip on Heng Shih and darted toward the Cimmerian's legs with terrible speed. It dodged over his low slash with unnatural agility and wrapped itself around his throat. The tentacle drew taut and clenched furiously, instantly cutting off Conan's breath, wrenching him from his feet, and dragging him, struggling, across the ground. A choked cry of pain and fury tore from the Cimmerian's throat as his body slid across the sand toward the waiting, wicked thorns. His free hand clutched at the tentacle encircling his throat, prying the cruelly ridged thing from his windpipe, while his sword hand whipped up and down in a convulsive surge of raw strength. The blade hewed through the oppressive arm, freeing him. Rolling, tearing the severed length of tentacle from his neck, Conan scrambled over the ground with the desperate speed of a wounded panther. The barbarian slid to a stop behind the obscene thing as four new tentacles erupted from its body.

From among the writhing nest of roots that formed the abomination's base came a thick cable as black and shiny as oiled leather. It was as big around as a man's thigh and led back across the sunbaked sand into the pool.

As the four new tentacles shot toward him, Conan rose on his knees, lifted his scimitar above his head, and slashed downward with all the remaining power in his body. The blade tore through the black cable and buried itself in the dry earth. Water burst from the sundered taproot like blood from a riven heart.

The plant-thing shuddered, the veins webbing its spiked trunk ceased throbbing, and its tentacles fell limply to the sand. It settled down heavily upon its bed of roots and then toppled sideways with slow grace, like a hewn tree. Its green skin was suddenly thick with dew, water running from its fallen trunk. It shriveled, giving up to the thirsting sand the water that had lent it life.

Heng Shih stood glassy-eyed where it had released him, bands of blood running freely down his torso. He staggered two unsteady steps away from the dead thing and collapsed onto the sand. The breath came loudly from his gaping mouth, and his shaven skull glistened with sweat.

Conan clambered over the corpse of the plant-thing, avoiding the sagging thorns, and fetched it a kick in its flowered crown. The drooping petals burst under his boot's impact, spattering water and vegetable pulp. He looked to Zelandra, who knelt beside Heng Shih, ministering to his wounds.

"I trust that was one of Ethram-Fal's guards," he said, tugging at his torn and bloodied shirt.

"Of course," said Zelandra absently, her attention on her bodyguard, who stared ahead stoically as she daubed at the wound that encircled his midriff. "That was a piece of work befitting a sorcerer dedicated to the magic of plants." She nodded at the toppled abomination, where it lay slowly dissolving into the sand. "A hell of an achievement, actually. The Emerald Lotus must have improved his abilities by no small amount."

"Crom," grunted the barbarian, peeling off his shirt and standing in his tarnished mail. "So we can expect to meet more of his creations?"

"Little doubt of it. I'm fairly certain that he can only send forth his projected self to places that he has already been in the flesh. Even so, I imagine he has paid at least one more visit to my house, found me gone, and drawn his own conclusions. It shouldn't take a great deal of wit to figure that I'm coming for him and his lotus."

The Cimmerian wondered if she felt equal to the task of battling such an accomplished sorcerer. He wondered how she felt about closing in on a powerful enemy who was probably aware of her approach. He wondered, but said nothing.

Neesa dabbed at the gash across his neck and collarbone with a cloth she had dampened in the pool. He let her swab at it and the deeper incision about his left biceps, then pulled away.

"Ymir, woman, I've been hurt worse by a hangover. Help Zelandra tend to Heng Shih before his yellow hide is bled white. I'll gather tinder for a fire and pitch the tents."

By the time that the sun had fallen below the western horizon, a tidy camp of three tents had been set up and a frugal meal of dried beef, hard bread, and oasis water had been served.

The campfire crackled, radiating a pleasant warmth onto sands now chill with the coming of night. Beyond the flaring glow of the fire and the dark ring of undergrowth, the desert receded in waves of sand, black and silver by moonlight, like a frozen sea. The slender scimitar of a quarter moon rode high in the heavens, skirting the icy torrent of the Milky Way.

"I'll take the first watch," said Conan, squatting beside the dying fire. Heng Shih nodded in gratitude as he rose with care from his seat and moved slowly toward his tent. Zelandra pulled her kettle from the red-orange coals and poured herself some tea. The gentle aroma of jasmine rose with the steam from her cup. Neesa's head lay comfortably upon the Cimmerian's shoulder, his arm about her trim waist.

A thin cry echoed through the desert night, diminished by distance and quickly fading. Neesa's body tensed against Conan's.

"What was that?" she whispered uneasily.

"A jackal," grunted the barbarian.

"Perhaps the Yizil," said Zelandra, blowing across the top of her teacup. Firelight turned her eyes to flame.

"Yizil?" asked Neesa, now sitting up stiffly.

"Desert ghouls," said Conan. "Haunters of ruins and gnawers of bones. They shun the open desert."

"Do they?" Neesa's eyes probed the darkness beyond the campfire's glow. Conan laughed gustily.

"They do. Go to bed. I promise that if any Yizil come by, I shall feed them to their brethren."

Neesa got to her feet and sidled reluctantly toward the Cimmerian's tent. "Now I shan't sleep until you join me."

Conan watched her disappear through the flap and frowned across the fire at Zelandra. "Did you have to tell her that? You knew that the Yizil are no danger here."

Zelandra grinned at him. She lifted her hands in an innocent shrug and nodded toward his tent.

"You should thank me," she said, and Conan smiled back at her.

"Seriously, my friend." Her voice grew softer as she continued. "I am concerned that we encountered a creature of Ethram-Fal's at such a distance from his lair."

"It is not such a distance. When we were atop the great sand dune beside this oasis, I could see the Dragon's Spine."

"Ishtar," she breathed. "So swiftly? You are truly a fine guide, Conan."

"Well," said the Cimmerian gruffly, "we aren't there yet. We must travel southeast into the foothills surrounding the Dragon's Spine in order to approach it from the angle we saw in Ethram-Fal's sorcerous projection. Tomorrow we should get close enough to tell whether I am a good guide or not."

Zelandra nodded and Conan rose, dusted himself off, and went to walk the perimeter.

In a short time he alone was awake, moving restlessly about the camp as silent as a shadow, disappearing in one direction to reappear in a few moments from another, memorizing the contours of the waste around

them.

Conan stood watch, while overhead the moon rose, the stars wheeled, and a flight of meteors slashed the sky with fire.

## ***Chapter Twenty-Seven***

The desert floor rose gradually, lifting into the rough uplands of rugged rock that held, somewhere in their labyrinthine vastness, the sculpted ridge that was the Dragon's Spine. The seemingly endless ocean of ochre dunes gave way to low hillocks of crumbling soil that gave way in turn to a new wilderness of stone outcrops and towers. Here the surface of the earth had buckled up, as though from unthinkable pressures within, shedding its skin of soil and baring raw and naked bones of mineral.

The party moved With excruciating slowness through this tortuous landscape. High up on the ragged rim of a ridge, Conan pointed off to the east, where the distinct and regular shape of the Dragon's Spine lay shimmering in the distance. From the lofty ridge they descended into even worse terrain—a literal maze of canyons and ravines that split the earth like cracks in the sunbaked bottom of a dry riverbed. The weary quartet advanced and then retreated down narrow defiles that wound promisingly in the right direction, only to end abruptly in a vertical wall. Canyons that began as broad and as easy to traverse as the Caravan Road shrank along their length until the body of an unmounted man could not squeeze through. Any passage they took initially seemed to lead in the direction that they sought, only to bend or double back until the travelers were riding away from their goal. Time and again the Cimmerian dismounted and climbed to a high vantage point in order to get his bearings. Agile as an ape, he would clamber up a rock wall or scale a stony spire to get a fix on the Dragon's Spine. The party would wait in dogged silence for him to return and order that they turn around, return to a fork, retry a passage that led in the wrong direction, or simply continue along the path that they were on.

It was well into the afternoon when they emerged from the mouth of a narrow gorge into a wide clearing that lay open to the sky. Passing from the cool shadows cast by rock walls into the golden glare of the sun, the party squinted, shaded their eyes and looked about. The clearing formed an irregular hub into which three small canyons opened. Off to the left a slender cleft ran away to the northeast, its walls rising swiftly and sharply from the floor of the clearing into a high series of jagged pinnacles. To the

right a larger defile dropped rapidly away to the southwest, its flattened path strewn with gravel and bracketed by low walls of broken stone. Directly in front of them the ground rose up into a worn hill of eroded rock, obscuring the opposite side of the clearing from view.

To the surprise of all, Conan nudged his camel to a trot and rode straight up the low hill before them. They followed in silence, having long since accepted the barbarian's guidance through this desert maze.

Heng Shih was as expressionless as ever, seemingly unperturbed by the bandaged wound that girdled his broad belly. Neesa rose nervously erect in her saddle, her eyes rarely leaving her mistress. The Lady Zelandra stared forward sightlessly, speaking only when spoken to and clutching the leather-wrapped box in her lap with both hands. She had made herself a turban and tucked her long, silver-shot hair inside it. Her face, sunburned and haggard, looked years older than it had only a few days before.

Once atop the hill, the party drew to a halt, their camels snuffling in gratitude. The far side of the hill descended steeply in a broad swath of loose stones and gravel. It fell away for many yards before ending abruptly at the edge of a precipitous cliff, where it apparently dropped away into an even lower canyon.

"There," said Conan, lifting a bare, bronzed arm. "The Dragon's Spine." The party stared off to the northeast and saw that he was right. The saw-toothed formation was just visible over the walls of the canyon that opened on their left, and, for the first time, its alignment seemed correct. Its appearance closely matched their first view of it in the background of Ethram-Fal's sorcerous projection.

"At last," whispered the Lady Zelandra in a small, dry voice.

"We make camp here," said the Cimmerian. "I believe that narrow ravine will lead us to Ethram-Fal's lair, but I cannot be certain how distant it is."

"So there is something that you cannot do, barbarian?" said Zelandra. Her right hand crept up her ribs and pressed there as if stanching a wound. "I am astonished to hear you admit it. This is my expedition and I insist that we proceed down that canyon immediately. We have no time to make camp. We will close with Ethram-Fal and destroy him before this day is done."



"Zelandra," said Conan evenly, "the day is already nearly done. Darkness falls much swifter at the bottom of a canyon than it does in the open air. There are clouds on the western horizon that may bring a storm, and we have no way of knowing how much farther there is to travel. Moreover, you are tired, milady."

"Tired? You insolent fool, even weary, I have strength enough to do what I must do. I say we go forward!" She wheeled upon her servants. "Would you follow this insubordinate savage instead of your mistress? I-I..." Her voice trailed off as her gaze passed over the concerned faces of Neesa and Heng Shih. Both of her hands clutched her torso as if they could unwind the bands of pain that tightened there. Tears glimmered in her dark eyes.

"Ah, sweet Ishtar's mercy," she said, voice low and choked with shame. "I'm sorry, my friends. Our comrade Conan is right, we must camp here for I am tired. So very tired."

Heng Shih seemed to appear at her camel's side. No one saw him dismount. His great hands gripped Zelandra gently about the waist and plucked her from the saddle as lightly as if she were a mannequin of silk. He set her on her feet, swept the dirt from the top of a flattened stone, and motioned for her to sit. She did, pressing her face into her hands as though she could not bear to look upon her fellow travelers. Conan spoke again.

"Zelandra, after we set up camp, Heng Shih and I will scout down the narrow canyon. We will go as far as we can before nightfall. We may well find Ethram-Fal's hiding place. If all goes well, we will be planning our method of attack tonight and carrying it out tomorrow morning. Rest, be strong, and you shall have your revenge."

Zelandra nodded, taking her hands from her face but keeping her eyes lowered. The remainder of the party went about setting up camp. Shortly, the three small tents were up, situated back and away from the hill's leading edge so that they would not be visible from any point in the clearing below. Conan forbade a fire, saying that they could have a cold supper whenever they hungered and that he wouldn't eat until he and Heng Shih returned from their scouting expedition. He balanced this unhappy news by breaking out one of the party's few bottles of wine and passing it around. Looking drawn and shaken, Zelandra took a token sip before retiring to her tent. As soon as she was out of earshot, the

Cimmerian turned to Neesa.

"Has she used the last of her lotus?"

"No. I know that she has more, though I'm not certain how much. She does not want to use it. Not even the tiny bit that would ease her pain. She fears that if she does, her resolve will weaken and she will take too much or all of it. She grows desperate. I'm sorry, Conan. You know that she meant you no insult, do you not?"

"Her words do not concern me; her actions do. Will she be strong enough to face the Stygian sorcerer when we finally find him?"

Neesa raised her pale hands in a helpless shrug. "How can I say? I think that she plans to use the last of the lotus to strengthen herself just before engaging Ethram-Fal. It really does seem to empower her sorcery. She took some just before sending the flame-wall against those bandits."

"She goes to battle with a wizard who claims to have an unlimited supply of the cursed drug. I wonder what manner of sorcery he will send against us."

To this Neesa made no reply. At her side, Heng Shih leaned forward and his hands made a series of deliberate motions in the air before him. Conan looked to Neesa questioningly.

"He asks if you wish to leave. He says that he will hold no grudge against you if you do."

"Hell," Conan grinned wolfishly, tossing back his black mane. "I promised Zelandra my services and will not back out now just because it's getting interesting."

The slightest trace of a smile came to the Khitan's lips and he extended his hand, offering the Cimmerian the wine bottle. Conan accepted it, threw back his head and took a long pull, his throat working as he swallowed.

"Ah," he sighed with satisfaction. "That is a passing good wine. Come now, let us dig out this scorpion's nest. Neesa, you must keep watch on the mouths of the canyons. I doubt very much that anyone will come out of the other two, but watch them anyway. If anyone but Heng Shih and I come

out of the one that we're heading into, that means we're probably dead. Keep low and awaken Zelandra. If intruders are about to discover you, flee. If you can't win free, kill as many as you can however you can. Scream like the devil, and if Heng Shih and I still live, we'll hear you, for sound carries very far in this waste. If we can, we'll come to your aid or at least avenge you. Stay alert."

With that the Cimmerian threw an arm around the woman's waist and drew her to him. While they kissed with undisguised passion, Heng Shih fell to studying the sky. He noted that there was indeed a dark mass of clouds swelling on the western horizon. He had time to observe it quite closely before Conan clapped him on the shoulder.

"Come on man, the day grows old."

The two men scuffled down the rocky slope and strode purposefully toward the dark slash of the canyon's mouth. Neesa dropped to a crouch at the crest of the hill's rise, nestling into the shadow of a boulder and wiping tingling lips with the back of a hand. As Conan and Heng Shih stepped into the narrow gap and disappeared from sight, she became conscious of a painful lump in her throat and cursed herself softly for a weakling. She reached back into the loose froth of her black hair and pulled the throwing dagger from her nape sheath. She thrust it into the hard ground before her and settled down to wait.

## ***Chapter Twenty-Eight***

The red sun, bloated and sullen, lay impaled upon the sharp and broken ridges to the west when the thing that had been Gulbanda of Shem came to a halt.

He was a ragged figure now, his garments tattered and stained. His hands, face, and beard were caked with ochre grime that he had made no effort to wipe away. Eyes as glassy and expressionless as chips of black quartz peered into the dim canyon mouth that opened before him.

Gulbanda had been walking for a night and a day without cease. The nearly fresh horse that he had taken from Nath, the archer, had been ridden relentlessly until it collapsed beneath him. Then he had walked, heedless of the killing sun, moving onward because it was all that he was capable of doing.

Now Gulbanda stopped and stared into the impenetrable darkness. A breeze, cool as a spring, blew from within the canyon and stirred his torn cloak.

He felt the pull deep inside his breast. Deep, where Shakar the Keshanian had stabbed to his core. It was as though a strong fist had closed about his pierced and withered heart and pulled steadily upon it in the direction that he must go. The necromantic sorcery that kept Gulbanda moving among the living also gave him his unerring sense of direction.

Standing as silent and motionless as his stone surroundings, Gulbanda searched what remained of his memories. They were vague tatters now, like wisps of dank fog fading on the chill wind of approaching night.

He remembered a dark room and a man bound to a steel chair.

He remembered a dagger sliding over the corded muscles of that man's forearm.

He remembered his sword flying from his fist.

Gulbanda lifted his sword hand and studied the dry stumps of two fingers. The black-haired Cimmerian. It was he who was responsible for all of this. It was he whose blood burned and pulled so deeply within Gulbanda's breast, drawing him onward with an irresistible compulsion that could end only with the barbarian's death. Zelandra's death. The acquisition of the silver box that Shakar craved so terribly.

Shakar the Keshanian—Gulbanda remembered his master, though only as an imperious face making difficult demands of him. He must do the things that Shakar had asked of him so long ago. He would please Shakar and the sorcerer would help him.

How could he help him? Gulbanda groped among the shattered shards of his memory. He lowered his head, the only sign of the torment that surged within as he strove to grasp some small part of his vanished humanity and felt the ceaseless, tidal pull of Conan's blood drawing him forward and away.

Gulbanda remembered, and raised his head. If he did as Shakar wished, then the sorcerer would make the pulling in his breast cease and

let him die. That was all that had to be done. If he killed the black-haired barbarian and the sorceress and got the silver box, then he would be allowed to die. There was nothing in all the world to desire except death.

The thing that had been a man and a warrior closed its dead eyes for the first time in days. Gulbanda saw his strong hands falling upon the Cimmerian, rending his flesh and breaking his limbs. He heard the barbarian's bones crack and his agonized cry of defeat.

Death was a most glorious reward for such a slight and agreeable service. ,

Gulbanda stalked into the canyon and was swallowed by darkness.

## ***Chapter Twenty-Nine***

The canyon walls rose to either side of the two men, hemming them into a defile not ten paces across. Heng Shih fought a moment's claustrophobia as they passed from the open clearing into the shadowy, enclosed space of the narrow cleft.

The first thing he became aware of was the silence. When riding with the party, the desolate and deserted landscape seemed invested with their life and movement. Their speech and the steady sounds of their passage obscured the awesome silence of the wasteland. Walking with quiet caution behind the barbarian, whose cat-like tread seemed not to disturb so much as a pebble, the full weight of the desert's silent emptiness seemed to bear down upon him. The only sound was the occasional rising of the wind, moaning like a ghost through the maze of canyons.

Heng Shih shook his bald head in a deliberate effort to rid himself of such useless thoughts. They were approaching the stronghold of an enemy.

They walked for almost an hour. The ridged walls of the narrow canyon rose slowly until they loomed at five times the height of a man. The path continued straight and the floor fairly even, cluttered only by the occasional pile of stone and sand that marked the site of a rock fall. As they stepped carefully about the base of one of these irregular heaps of debris, the sun broke free of the clouds on the western horizon and spilled its long rays across the empty desert. The stone passageway was immediately filled with a strange roseate illumination. Heng Shih looked about in wonder. The Cimmerian paid no heed, realizing that the sun's

last light was rebounding from the red rock walls, tinting the cooling air with a lurid glow.

Conan raised his hand to signal a halt, and the Khitan shouldered up next to him. Ahead, the walls drew together as the canyon bent, turning sharply to the east. The Cimmerian lowered himself into a crouch and drew his scimitar, which in the ruddy light seemed dipped in blood. Heng Shih left his weapon in its sheath, but bent down beside his leader.

"That," whispered Conan, gesturing with his bared sword, "is a fine place for a sentry. Or an ambush."

Heng Shih nodded to show that he understood, but the Cimmerian was already moving forward. He clung to the shadows at the base of the canyon wall, as silent as smoke on the desert wind. The Khitan followed, slowed by his desire to match Conan's stealth. The red glow of sunset faded abruptly, plunging the canyon into a murky gray twilight.

At the corner the barbarian drew up short, listening. Placing a palm on the cool stone of the canyon wall, he dropped to one knee and peered carefully around the bend. He stared ahead for a moment, then looked back at Heng Shih, who was still advancing with careful steps. When the big Khitan was finally at his side, he sheathed his sword and spoke softly.

"We have found it. Take a look." With that Conan stood and leapt nimbly across the open bend in the passage. He lit soundlessly in the shadow of an ancient rock fall, crouched, and continued his judicious examination of whatever lay around the canyon's corner.

Heng Shih swallowed heavily, went to his knees, and slowly leaned forward until he could see around the bend. His eyes widened in amazement.

Ahead, the narrow canyon continued for another six or eight paces before lowering slightly and opening out into a broad, extended cul-de-sac. Hemmed by sheer walls, the canyon ended in a wide clearing with a floor as smooth and level as the courtyard of a castle. In the clearing's center, not twenty paces away, two men lingered about a circular pit. One squatted beside it, holding his hands toward it as if to warm himself. The other leaned upon a spear, regarding his companion and speaking in low tones. Each wore the gleaming mail and fine silk of a Stygian mercenary. Short swords hung at their belts and their heads were

protected by caps of steel.

But it was what lay beyond the sentries that captured the attention of the intruders and had them agape in the concealing shadows. Another twenty paces beyond the smoldering firepit rose the rear wall of the box canyon, and it was carved into the likeness of a great palace facade. Twilight had begun to purple the sky above the clearing and the brilliant pinpoints of the first stars were just flickering into life, but there was still enough daylight to see the wonder that was the Palace of Cetriss.

A row of four massive pillars, each as great in girth as the mightiest tree, reached up from their roots in wide bases set into the clearing's floor to support the overhanging lip of the canyon rim high above. Though obviously cut directly out of the cliff face, each pillar stood independently. An open black doorway was set between the two central pillars, and a broad flight of stairs descended from the ominous portal to the floor of the natural courtyard. Even at a distance and in the dying light, the carvings that surrounded the frame of the doorway appeared elaborate and passing strange. Spread out above the dark opening was a row of three equally dark windows, each bracketed with worn carvings similar to those that adorned the portal. A second row of open windows was arrayed above that, close to the tops of the towering pillars and the carved crest of the canyon rim.

Conan shivered in the cooling breeze. The palace had at least three stories and had been sculpted from living rock, a feat that would have astounded even the pyramid-building Stygians. Crom alone knew how deeply its halls and chambers bored into the desert's stony breast. Facing them in the deepening twilight, it projected an overpowering aura of unthinkable age and implacable purpose.

The Cimmerian's blue eyes burned upon the open doorway, narrowing in thought. There was no door or gate that he could discern, though he couldn't rule out some sort of sorcerous barrier. Even without any kind of closure, the passage could be held by very few men against a much more formidable force than the Lady Zelandra's little party. His gaze lifted to the open windows arrayed above the door, and then up to the second row of windows. He frowned as the voices of the sentries around the firepit rose in argument.

"So now we freeze?" demanded the fellow squatting beside the pit.  
"Why should we be forbidden fires without as well as within the palace? A

late watch without hot mulled wine will be a pain in the arse. Come on, the last embers are almost out. Let me add a stick of firewood. No one will be the wiser."

"Hush," said the soldier who stood leaning upon his spear. "Don't be an idiot. Ath said there are to be no fires. The master obviously wishes to avoid showing our location to intruders."

"Intruders? Bah! Who would venture into this hellish land? And how would they find us if they did? I tell you, the master's gone soft in the head."

The spear carrier recoiled at this, shooting a glance at the darkened door of the palace. "Quiet, you fool! If the master hears you talking like that, you'll feed the lotus."

The other went silent, staring glumly into the Tire pit. He drew a small, dried branch from beneath his silken cloak and thrust it down into the pit, working it into the ashes there.

"That will keep the coals alive," he said in sullen tones. "You'll thank me after I've made the mulled wine."

"If it starts to smoke, I'll put it out with your blood," replied the other curtly.

Conan leapt silently back across the canyon floor, landing on all fours beside Heng Shih, who twitched in surprise. He had a tense moment, wondering if the guards had spotted the barbarian, but there was no outcry. Even if they had glanced his way, the Cimmerian had been merely a shadow moving among shadows. He laid a hard hand upon the Khitan's shoulder.

"Come, let us return to camp."

The return journey along the darkening canyon seemed swifter and easier to Heng Shih. Conan was able to recall every irregularity in the path and led his companion as surely as though he had traversed its length a dozen times. As they drew close to camp, Heng Shih began to relax and stepped up his pace to walk beside the Cimmerian. He had been doing this for only a moment when Conan drew to a sudden stop. The Khitan stumbled to a halt, staring at the barbarian without comprehension.



Lifting his face and flaring his nostrils, Conan leaned into the gentle breeze, while Heng Shih looked on in amazement. He reached out a hand to tap the Cimmerian's shoulder, but drew back when the barbarian shot a glance at him and spoke.

"They've built a fire."

Heng Shih's head snapped up, searching the slender slash of cobalt sky that was visible between the canyon's walls. No smoke trail could be seen there. When he lowered his gaze, he saw that Conan had started toward the camp at a dead run. Heng Shih took off in pursuit, wincing as the slap of his sandals on the rocky path was magnified and hurled back at him by the stone walls.

## ***Chapter Thirty***

Ethram-Fal lay asleep and dreaming, and in his dream he knew fear.

In his dream he strode across a floor of black marble through pale and densely swirling mists. In his dream it seemed to him that he had been walking for an eternity without encountering anything save the silent mist that moved and roiled without the benefit of a wind to stir it. Then there arose in Ethram-Fal the absolute certainty that he was not alone in the limitless fog and that something was lurking ahead of him, just out of sight. Along with this certainty came an overpowering dread. Whatever it was that concealed itself in the mists, the Stygian did not wish to encounter it. Ethram-Fal abruptly changed the direction of his steps, swinging to the right and hastening forward.

Almost immediately he felt the foreboding presence once again and this time a huge and shapeless shadow darkened the fog before him. He came to a fearful stop, his breath going ragged in his throat, then spun around and ran in the opposite direction.

In his dream Ethram-Fal had not taken a dozen steps in wild flight before the dark presence came out of the mist, in front of him yet again, as though his desperate drive to escape had only brought him nearer to that which he wished above all to avoid.

It was the idol of Cetriss's temple. The nameless, faceless sphinx of black stone lounged before him so that he ran full between its outstretched paws before sliding to a frantic halt. It was motionless, a thing of carved

stone that appeared rooted to the mist-blanketed floor, yet it menaced the Stygian in a way that nothing in his life had ever done. He fell to his knees, his heart swelling painfully in his breast until crying out was impossible. Above him, the smoothly featureless face of the god blurred, losing its glossy sheen and becoming an even darker space: a black portal opening out upon a measureless void.

Ethram-Fal writhed on the marble floor before the god of Cetriss and found his voice. He begged for mercy in raw, shrill tones.

"*Tribute*," came a sourceless whisper, chill as the gulfs between the stars. "*Sacrifice*."

"Yes!" screamed the cowering sorcerer. "Yes! All that you desire!"

"*Tribute*," came the voice again, passionless as the wind. "*Sacrifice*."

Pain lanced through the Stygian's consciousness and suddenly the black sphinx was gone. Somehow there was a knotted rope around his chest and someone was pulling cruelly upon it, tightening it until it dug into his ribs. He clutched at the rope, drawing a cramped breath and wincing at the stabbing sensation it produced. He looked ahead through tear-blinded eyes and saw that the rope's end was held by the Lady Zelandra. As he watched, she jerked brutally upon it, causing the cord to bite even deeper into his flesh. Her face was an expressionless mask. Ethram-Fal tore at the binding rope with both hands and cursed her.

"Release me, damn you! You are my slave! Release me!"

The Stygian sorcerer snapped awake, prone upon the floor of his laboratory. He was unsure if he had cried out loud.

It took him more than a moment to orient himself. He lifted his face from the cool and dusty stone of the floor. One of his arms was outstretched, the gray sleeve of his robe drawn back almost to his shoulder. He sat up stiffly and looked about himself with rheumy eyes.

He was alone in the room. How long had he lain here? What had he been doing? The muscles of his torso seemed to have been strained somehow. A tight belt of pain throbbed intermittently about his chest. That explained the dream, he thought, or part of it anyway. He lifted a hand to rub his brow and noticed with a start that there was a wound on

the inside of his left forearm. He studied it in alarmed amazement.

An open gash about two inches long parted the flesh bloodlessly, resembling nothing so much as a cut in a piece of cooked pork. Ethram-Fal put his right hand over the wound and stood up with careful deliberation. He leaned heavily against the table closest to him, saw what lay upon it, and immediately remembered everything.

Lying open upon the table was his long, ebony box of Emerald Lotus powder. Beside it, shining dully in the yellow radiance of the light-globes, was his irregularly shaped dagger. He could recall it all now. He had slashed the flesh of his arm in order to pour raw lotus powder into his blood. There was no lotus in or around the wound, so he imagined that he had collapsed immediately after cutting himself.

He felt as though he had just recovered from a long and debilitating illness. What in Set's name had he been doing? Though groggy, Ethram-Fal realized that he was thinking clearly for the first time in many days. He could not remember when he had last eaten or slept. All he had consumed was wine leavened with larger and larger portions of Emerald Lotus. Somehow his measured intake of the drug had become a thoughtless binge that only ended when it had endangered his life.

Ethram-Fal bandaged his forearm and thought dark thoughts.

When had his control over the lotus flagged? How long had he gone without taking any steps toward the completion of his grand design? He had done little but immerse himself in his newfound power when he should have been using it productively. He needed systematic harvesting so that he would have enough lotus to snare the wizards of Stygia into his service. He needed to prepare more traps in case the Lady Zelandra had found some way of locating him and came seeking vengeance.

"Thoughtless," he hissed to himself, jerking the bandage tight around his arm.

That was all over now, he thought. He had known that the lotus was powerful, but he had been incautious and allowed himself to indulge in it without control. It must be used like a tool, he reasoned. He was its master and not the other way around.

Now he must check on the health of the lotus in its chamber and

muster his mercenaries. He would discretely ask Ath how long it had been since he had last seen him and warn the soldiers about possible intruders. Snatching a blue velvet sack full of kaokao leaves from a nearby table, Ethram-Fal started for the door and then came to an uncertain stop. The ring of pain around his breast flickered into being once again, constricting his breathing. What was it? Had he contracted some disease while lying unconscious on the cold stone floor?

A memory came unbidden to the Stygian. It was the memory of Shakar the Keshanian standing wild-eyed in his chambers, making threats that he was too weak and foolish to back up, claiming that his chest was gripped in a vise of fire.

Ethram-Fal turned and looked back upon his ebony box of lotus powder. He wondered how long he had remained unconscious and if it was possible that his body was already suffering for want of the drug. He squinted at the box, rubbing at his ribs with a cold hand. Surely a little dose would do him no harm. He need not overindulge.

"Milord!" Ath's voice came echoing hollowly down the stone corridor. "Milord, we have cornered it!"

Footfalls thudded outside the room; then the tall mercenary pushed through the blanket that hung over the doorway and confronted his employer. He hesitated a moment, staring and obviously trying to find his voice. Ethram-Fal became aware of his wrinkled and dusty robes.

"Forgive me for disturbing you," said Ath finally, "but we have cornered the intruder in the room of the great statue. It attacked the guards, knocking one senseless and dragging the other into the temple. He won free, crying out so loudly that he woke us all. Come quickly, I fear that it will try to escape and the men will be forced to slay it."

"It?" said Ethram-Fal. His captain nodded vigorously, starting to back out the door.

"It is not a man. Come quickly and see for yourself." The soldier waited in the doorway, holding the blanket to one side, looking to his motionless lord.

"Go," murmured the sorcerer. "I'll follow presently."

"But..." began Ath.

"Go!" shouted Ethram-Fal, and his mercenary disappeared through the blanket and hurried away.

The Stygian turned and walked purposefully to the table with the ebony box. He used three fingers to scoop a mouthful of deep green power from the box to his lips. Shudders coursed through his thin body and the ring of pain around his chest evaporated. He threw back his head in pleasure, sucking the last of the lotus from his fingertips. A surge of bright energy radiated along every nerve. His mind raced, borne up on a crest of superhuman confidence. He passed through the door and down the corridors of the palace in a haze of ecstasy. He muttered a brief incantation and his feet lifted up and away from the floor so that he floated effortlessly along the hallway as quickly as a man could run. A slack grin spread across his wizened features. The spell of levitation usually took hours of preparation. With sudden, shocking clarity he realized what a fool he was to doubt himself or his lotus. He was in control and there was nothing that he could not do, no spell that he could not conjure, no foe that he could not overcome.

As he drew near to the temple of the great sphinx, he allowed himself to slow somewhat. Passing around a corner, the armored backs of four of his mercenaries came into view. The men were crowded into one of the doorways of the temple. They held naked swords and were intent upon whatever lay before them.

"Your pardon," he said with gentle sarcasm, and the little crowd parted in dumbstruck astonishment to let him pass.

Once inside the great chamber, he banished the spell of levitation, allowing himself to settle down to the floor. Each of the huge, circular room's three doors was filled with armed men and each group held aloft a number of brightly glowing light-globes so that the chamber was well illuminated despite its size. Only the high ceiling remained unlit, arching up into a darkness like that of a starless night.

Standing before the black bulk of the statue was a pale man-like form: It stood fidgeting in front, of the flat altar set between the extended paws of the faceless sphinx. Ethram-Fal walked a little closer, stopped, and marveled.

It was naked and shrunken, shorter even than he, but it had the appearance of animal strength. Tendons were wound like wires around its stark limbs. Hunched like a baboon, its skin was the color of the desert, hanging on its emaciated frame in reptilian folds. It twisted long, tapering fingers together, and the dirty talons clicked one against the other. Its brow receded sharply in bony furrows above the lambent yellow glow of its eyes. The nose was little more than two small pits above the lipless mouth, which opened and closed in quick, bestial pants, revealing a pointed, serpentine tongue.

"*Id Nyarlathotep*," it whined.

"Holy Set!" Ethram-Fal was amazed. "It speaks!"

The soldiers at the doors stirred, murmuring to one another. The creature flinched at this, drawing back toward the statue that loomed behind it, as if seeking protection. It spoke again, and though it sounded much as though a python or some other great reptile were attempting human speech, Ethram-Fal found that he understood the words. It was speaking an archaic version of his own tongue. It was speaking in Old Stygian.

"You die for Nyarlathotep." Needle talons stroked the air and its eyes burned brighter.

Ethram-Fal spoke haltingly in Old Stygian. "You make sacrifice?" It bobbed its head, bird-like.

"Yes. Yes. Antelope. Scorpion. Man. Man best. You die for Nyarlathotep."

"Die for that?" The sorcerer gestured at the silent statue. The creature looked back and bobbed its head again, pressing long hands reverently to its ridged and reptilian breast.

"Yes! *Id Nyarlathotep*!" It took a hesitant, shuffling step toward Ethram-Fal, who seemed to pay it no heed.

"Why?"

"Live!" its thin voice rose. "So I live! So Cetriss lives! You die for Nyarlathotep!" Quivering, it lunged toward the sorcerer, claws reaching

for his breast and the heart that beat within. A cry arose from the massed mercenaries and they started forward, but Ethram-Fal halted the creature by merely raising a hand. It lurched to a stop not two paces away from the wizard, who held one palm out toward the thing. He crooked his fingers as if gripping something transparent in the air before him. The creature writhed in invisible bonds, held in place by sorcery.

"This is your immortality?" cried Ethram-Fal. "O Cetriss, mighty necromancer, did you abandon all your powers to live forever as a beast enslaved to a statue?" The sorcerer's face twisted in transcendent rage and his fingers clenched in a loose fist. The desert ghoul that was the mage Cetriss snarled mindlessly as it was lifted, writhing, off the floor.

"I followed you! I thought you a hero! You are a disgrace! *You* die for Nyarlathotep!" Cetriss's body lifted farther into the air and moved slowly backward until it hovered above the altar that lay waiting between its god's paws.

"Tribute!" screamed Ethram-Fal. "Sacrifice!" He clenched his fist and crushed Cetriss. The bones of the last survivor of Old Stygia broke like dry kindling and his blood spilled down upon the altar in a dark rain. Ethram-Fal gave his fist a last convulsive shake and let the broken body fall. It lay, twisted in upon itself, a discarded bit of offal that had once been one of the world's mightiest sorcerers. For the briefest instant the Stygian thought that he saw a ghostly tendril, a stream of pallid vapor, rising from the body of Cetriss and funneling into the black face of his god. He blinked. It was nothing.

The Stygian turned away from the corpse in disgust and saw that his soldiers were standing uncertainly about the doorways and regarding him with a mixture of astonishment and fear. This pleased the sorcerer.

"Ath," he called, bringing the captain jogging forward out of the cluster of men in the east door.

"Most impressive, milord," said Ath when he stood before his master. The sorcerer pulled the blue velvet sack of kaokao leaves from his belt and tossed it to Ath, who caught it neatly in one hand.

"Excellent work, Ath. Distribute these among the men. Every man should get one. You may keep all that remain." The tall captain nodded in grateful enthusiasm as Ethram-Fal raised his hands above his head and

addressed the rest of his mercenaries.

"I am most pleased with your efficiency. Captain Ath has a reward for each of you. However, I wish to encourage the sentries to even greater vigilance as I suspect that we may soon encounter other, more human, foes. I have reason to suspect that a sorceress may essay an attack on our palace. Capture her alive for me and I shall be greatly pleased."

The soldiers clapped naked swords against their shields and cheered in loyalty and anticipation of their reward of kaokao leaves. When Ethram-Fal turned away, they came forward and gathered swiftly around Ath, hands extended for their bounty. Ath, grinning widely, passed out the leaves as quickly as he could.

As the sorcerer reached the north doorway, a spontaneous cheer rose behind him. When he turned to acknowledge it, the cheer swelled twice more. He lifted a hand in a languid wave, smiling beneficently upon his men as he basked in their approval. The men were his. The Emerald Lotus was his. And now the mantle of Cetriss was his. How could anything stop him now?

A shout cut through the dwindling applause. A single soldier had run into the temple and now stood waving his arms and yelling for attention. Ethram-Fal frowned.

"Silence! Hear me!" The soldier's hands dropped to his sides as the gathering went silent and all eyes fell upon him.

"And where have you been, Phandoros? came a voice from among the milling mercenaries.

"Captain Ath sent me to sentry duty when the beast was cornered," began the man defensively. "I come to tell the master that I saw a column of smoke to the southwest. There are intruders in the canyons."

## ***Chapter Thirty-One***

When Heng Shih emerged into the clearing, he saw that Conan was already atop the hill. The Khitan broke into a sprint, his heavy-set form shooting over the ground with surprising speed. Chest heaving, he reached the little grouping of tents just in time to see the Cimmerian kicking dirt over a small fire. Zelandra stood to one side, clutching her teapot and



scowling at Conan with exaggerated disgust. Neesa squatted in front of one of the tents, rubbing at her brow in a gesture at once weary and frustrated.

Conan finished burying the fire and commenced packing the soil down upon it with the heel of his boot.

"I trust that you're satisfied now?" Zelandra's voice was so strange that both Heng Shih and Neesa looked at her in surprise. It was thin and rasped in her throat like a file.

"You may have given away our position for a cup of tea," said Conan without expression.

"I need my strength," said Zelandra loudly. "I need the tea to help me rest." She brandished the teapot to emphasize her point. Her left arm was held rigidly across her stomach, gripping her ribs.

Conan looked up into the freshly dark evening sky. The air was strangely still, the sky pellucid and speckled with stars except where the swelling clouds massed to the west.

"We should move the camp," he turned to Heng Shih. "Those guards seemed inattentive, but the smoke would have been easily seen had they but looked around."

"Guards?" Zelandra looked from the Cimmerian to the Khitan and back again. "You found Ethram-Fal's hiding place?"

"Yes, my lady. It is less than two leagues distant. If your smoke was spotted, they could have an armed party here any time now."

"Heng Shih! Was it a palace?" The voice of the sorceress quavered with desperate energy. Her bodyguard's hands passed through a number of signs. The movements were concise and measured, his face betraying no emotion.

"Yes!" cried Zelandra exultantly. "Just as the legends would have it! We attack first thing tomorrow morning. I'll teach that withered fool to trifle with me. I'll walk into his parlor and tear his bloody heart out!"

"This is madness," said Conan flatly. "We must move the camp. We

could be set upon.at any time."

"Be silent, barbarian. The fire lasted only a moment. I must rest now. Keep watch yourself if you are worried." Zelandra stepped forward and set her teapot down neatly in the center of the smothered fire, as though it might still be warmed thereon. "Awaken me if we are attacked, and I shall smite the fools with sorcery." With that she turned about and ducked into her tent. The flap swung shut behind her.

Conan looked to Neesa, who nodded, came to her feet and strode quickly across the camp. She followed Zelandra into her tent and immediately muted voices rose from it.

The Cimmerian strode to the hill's leading edge, looking down to the canyon that led to the Palace of Cetriss and Ethram-Fal. Heng Shih followed, watching the barbarian as he scanned the clearing below.

"Nothing yet," grumbled Conan. "We must find the swiftest route of escape." He turned and loped back through the camp and on to the hill's far side, where it fell away in a long, gravel slope that ended sharply, far below, in a cliff's edge. The barbarian made his way easily down the loose incline. Heng Shih followed more carefully. Night had fallen and the slope was even more treacherous than it appeared. Sand and gravel seemed to grease the hillside as it grew ever more steep. Heng Shih staggered, his boots losing purchase as his footing gave way. He caught himself, but not before kicking up a cloud of acrid dust.

The slope finally petered out into a short expanse of level, gravel-strewn stone that was sheared off a few paces away by the sharp edge of the cliff. Conan reached the rim and peered over. There was an almost vertical drop of thirty feet ending in a dry, sandy runoff cluttered with rounded boulders, gleaming as pale as scattered bones in the light of the rising moon.

"Morrigan and Macha," cursed the Cimmerian. "This is no good. We'll be best off if we head back along the canyon that brought us here. Listen." He turned abruptly and put a hand on Heng Shih's shoulder. "I know little about wizardry and wish that I knew even less, but your mistress seems in poor condition to engage Ethram-Fal in any kind of combat, sorcerous or otherwise. You must convince her to attack by stealth. A frontal attack would be suicide. Tomorrow I can scout along the top of the canyon walls and try to find a way to approach the Stygian's palace from above. If I can

find a path, we might be able to lower ourselves down through the open windows of the upper floor and take our enemies by surprise. What do you think?"

Heng Shih lifted his hands as if to sign, then dropped them to his sides with a sigh. He nodded.

"And can you get Zelandra to agree to move the camp?" asked the barbarian. "Her madness could bring death to us all."

The Khitan bristled, his hands becoming fists. He shook his head violently from side to side, scowling darkly.

"Don't be a fool. If you care for your mistress, then save her from herself. Enough jabbering, let's..."

The Cimmerian fell suddenly silent. A frigid finger traced a line along Heng Shih's spine.

"Did you hear something?" breathed Conan. Heng Shih shook his head and listened. The desert's ponderous silence filled his ears like thick cotton. The Khitan stepped carefully, turned his back to the cliff edge and stared up the slope, alert for any sound or sign of movement. Conan's body lowered into a fighting crouch, his eyes taking on a feral gleam in the darkness. Heng Shih's breath slowed and thickened, seeming to clog his lungs.

Then came the sharp scrape of a boot on stone.

Heng Shih spun around, heart in his throat, hand scrabbling for his hilt. A black figure shot up over the rim of the cliff, springing from the sheer face like a monstrous spider. The Khitan had his sword half drawn before a fist like a war-hammer slammed into the side of his head. The muscles of his neck screamed in protest as his bald skull was wrenched to one side. Heng Shih reeled, his senses swimming, and stumbled helplessly into Conan. The Cimmerian sidestepped his stricken friend, who crashed to the ground, sprawling and sliding in the gravel.

Conan's sword flashed into his fist, but the black figure moved even faster. He dove in through the Cimmerian's guard, his extended hands locking around Conan's throat. Fingers like blunt daggers sank deeply into flesh, choking off his breath.

"Death," rasped Gulbanda, thrusting his drawn and grimy face into Conan's. The Cimmerian reared back and drove the fist clutching his scimitar into the lich's forehead with all the strength of his arm. The metal pommel crunched on bone and ripped skin the consistency of desiccated leather. The impact tore Gulbanda's hands from Conan's throat and sent him staggering back and away. The barbarian gave his attacker no time to recover, lunging in with a blinding, two-handed cut to the ribs. It was like hewing an oak. The blade thudded into Gulbanda's torso, sank in an inch, and stuck fast.

"Crom!" swore Conan, jerking back on his sword. The blade remained lodged in the dead man's hardened flesh. Retreating a step, the Cimmerian tripped over the prone body of Heng Shih and staggered, ducking low. Gulbanda's bony hands clawed the air where he had stood. Conan stumbled sideways, still gripping the hilt of the scimitar with both hands, and delivered a savage kick to his opponent's chest. His boot landed with terrific force, slamming Gulbanda back off his steel in a cloud of ochre dust. The dead man reeled backwards, recovered his balance and came forward again without an instant's hesitation. Both sword and dagger swung in their sheaths at Gulbanda's belt. He had forgotten their use.

"Death," wheezed Gulbanda, coming toward the Cimmerian with his claw-like hands held out to grasp and rend. Icy gray moonlight shone full in his face as cracked lips peeled back from broken teeth and a pale scar parted the filthy thatch of beard.

Recognition and horror drove a frigid spike through Conan's belly. His heel slipped on stone and the Cimmerian realized that he was standing on the rim of the precipice. He flourished the scimitar in a moon-glittering figure eight, trying to make Gulbanda keep his distance. But the dead man did not fear his steel. He drew up short a moment, then dove headlong for the barbarian's throat.

Conan braced his feet and lashed the scimitar from right to left in a brutal, vertical cut that struck Gulbanda's outstretched left arm at the elbow. Fibrous flesh and dried bone split under the impact. The severed limb flew from its bloodless stump even as the dead man's body slammed into Conan's, knocking him backward and sending both combatants hurtling over the edge of the cliff.

There was a moment of sick vertigo as the pair dropped into darkness;

then Conan twisted in midair, shoving Gulbanda out and away from him. The barbarian's falling body scraped against the cliff face in a small explosion of dirt and gravel. He clawed frantically at the wall, striving to slow his fall, struck the floor of the dry wash on his side, and blacked out.

There was an indeterminate time of darkness and silence during which Conan's consciousness struggled to rise, like a swimmer trapped beneath the surface of a black lake. At some point came the distant and dream-like sound of feminine screams, but they faded back into the heavy silence and it was as if they had never been.

The Cimmerian sat up carefully, sand spilling from his hair. He had landed in the sculpted sand of the dry wash, which had cushioned the impact somewhat. His ribs ached abominably and his head spun. The scimitar lay at the base of the cliff, a crescent of silver in the gray rubble. Conan lunged for it, grasped it, and stood up unsteadily. Standing in the shadow of the cliff, he watched the world reel. He shook his head in a leonine fashion, trying to clear it. Though it felt as if every inch of his body had been bruised by hammers, he seemed to have suffered no serious injury.

Gulbanda had fallen only a few paces away. He lay on his back, bent and broken over a small boulder. He writhed weakly but ceaselessly, like an insect on a pin. Bent backwards almost double over the boulder that had snapped his spine, his remaining hand clawed listlessly at the air.

Conan's senses cleared and he stepped forward, gazing in fearful awe at his deathless adversary. Something small crawled from the shadow of the boulder and into the silvery moonlight. Gulbanda's severed left hand groped spider-like across the ground, dragging the dead weight of its forearm behind it. A surge of fresh horror lifted the hair on the back of the Cimmerian's neck. The hand moved blindly away from Gulbanda's helpless body. Conan bent forward and plucked the dagger from the dingy sheath on his foe's girdle. Then he took two quick steps forward, knelt and drove the blade through the thing's wrist, pinning the grisly limb to the earth. The pallid fingers clenched and unclenched in the sand.

"Death," hissed a voice, little more than a feeble whisper, yet as cold and piercing as an arctic blast. "Death."

Conan straightened. The breeze picked up, strangely warm, blowing his dark mane back from his face. He looked down upon the prone and broken

form of Gulbanda of Shem.

"Death," sighed the dead man.

"Certainly," said Conan and, lifting the scimitar, hewed off Gulbanda's head. The body jerked and slowed, but never ceased its restless movement. Gulbanda's skull struck the packed sand and rolled behind the boulder. The barbarian turned away and sheathed his sword in one smooth motion. He strode to the base of the cliff and began, with swift and certain movements, to climb it.

Behind him, in the shadow of the boulder, Gulbanda's head lay blinking up at the cold stars, lips twisting soundlessly as he called for a death that would not come.

## ***Chapter Thirty-Two***

Conan came over the rim of the cliff in a low crouch. He scanned the long slope rising before him. After assuring himself that there was no one about, he looked to the sky, wondering how long he had lain senseless at the base of the cliff. The night sky was already half obscured by the dense clouds unfurling from the west. The stars wavered and disappeared before their leading edge as they raced across the heavens. An unnaturally warm breeze rolled through the canyons, growing slowly in strength as it moaned among the crags.

The Cimmerian dropped to one knee beside the sprawled form of Heng Shih. The Khitan lay facedown, his bulky body partially covered by dirt and gravel. Conan gave him a firm shake and Heng Shih stirred feebly, then sat up. He looked about himself wildly, eyes wide with panicked surmise.

"By Ymir," rambled the barbarian. "And you said that I had a hard head."

The Khitan ran a wide hand over the side of his shaven skull, touching gingerly above his left ear, where the skin was already beginning to swell and discolor. He stood up slowly, shaking the dirt from his clothing. He fixed his gaze upon Conan.

"That was an old friend of Shakar the Keshanian, come back to settle a score," said Conan, answering the unspoken query.

Heng Shih frowned uncertainly, setting a hand upon his hilt.

"Don't worry about him. He's done. Let's check the camp. I fear the worst." The Cimmerian turned suddenly and started up the treacherous slope with long, quick strides. The Khitan kept pace, though he fought off waves of dizziness with every step. The wind had picked up, throwing dust into their eyes and striving with invisible hands to thrust them back down the incline.

The camp was deserted.

Heng Shih stumbled into the center of the encampment, staring about with grim desperation, dismay apparent in his every movement. All three of the tents were empty and one had collapsed. Its crumpled fabric rippled and flapped forlornly with each fresh gust. The eroded stone of the hilltop showed no sign of struggle, but Conan pointed wordlessly to where the hill dropped away into the clearing. Two pale forms lay still in the darkness there. Heng Shih ran haltingly toward them, then slowed, breathing a sigh of relief when he saw that they were not the bodies of Neesa and the Lady Zelandra.

The corpses of two Stygian mercenaries lay not ten paces apart. The nearest of the pair had a charred blot for a face. Curls of steam rose from empty, blackened eye sockets and were torn away by the wind. The second soldier gripped with both hands the hilt of the dagger that had pierced his throat.

Heng Shih stared down at the dead men, then noticed that Conan had knelt beside the fallen tent. The Cimmerian was examining a bit of cloth that bore dark stains. He stood and held it out to the Khitan. The wind toyed with the discolored fabric, tossing it about, but Heng Shih could see that it was the bloodstained remnants of Zelandra's turban.

He walked stiffly to Conan and tore the scrap from the barbarian's grasp. His face hardened into a mask of stone. The blood on the fabric had not yet congealed, and it came away on his fingers. He let the remains of the turban fall from his hands. The wind whipped the tattered cloth away into the night and the growing storm.

Heng Shih unsheathed his scimitar and started down the hill toward the narrow canyon that led to the Palace of Cetriss.

"Hold!" Conan's voice rang out above the wind like the clangor of steel on steel. "Don't be a fool."

Heng Shih drew to a halt, his back to the Cimmerian, then turned slowly to face him. The Khitan's eyes held a bleakness that was terrible to behold. He placed his right hand on the center of his broad breast, and then held it out in the direction of Ethram-Fal's lair.

"Yes," said the barbarian, "I understand." He bent over, rummaging in the crumpled remains of the fallen tent, and came up with a jug of wine. He plucked out the cork with his teeth, spat it away and offered the bottle to Heng Shih.

"Have a drink and heed me well. Your mistress is alive, else the Stygians would have left her here as they did the bodies of their comrades. If you walk into their stronghold you'll be butchered like a sheep and leave Zelandra alive in the hands of the Stygian wizard. Is that what you want?"

The Khitan shook his head painfully, shoulders slumping as the cruel tension wracking his body loosened its grasp.

"I thought not. Now, look to the sky. This is no ordinary storm that comes upon us, but a sandstorm out of hell itself. I've seen a few in my time on the desert, but never one that filled the heavens like this one. The damn thing probably sprang up around Harakht and has been growing larger over every league it's traveled. It should give us fine cover."

Conan thrust the wine at Heng Shih, who finally accepted it. The Cimmerian ducked into one of the two standing tents, leaving the big Khitan standing alone with the bottle. He squinted at it, took a sip and cast it aside. The crockery shattered on stone. He had no time for such things.

The barbarian emerged from the tent carrying his leather • helmet, a coil of rope, and two of Neesa's silk shirts. As Heng Shih watched, Conan donned the helmet, looped the rope over a brawny shoulder, then tossed one of the shirts to him. The Khitan caught it before the wind snatched the garment away, and stared at it without comprehension.

"We'll do as I said earlier. I'll lead us across the canyon tops to the sorcerer's fortress. The storm will not make it any easier for us, but it is our only real chance. Tie the shirt around your head so that it covers your



mouth and nose. Leave a thin space to see through. It will provide a little protection from the sand."

Heng Shih stood in place lifelessly, glancing from the shirt in his hands to the place where the ragged tops of the canyon walls met the lowering belly of the storm. The wind whipped through the camp and rushed away into darkness.

"Come on," said Conan, knotting the shirt at the base of his bull neck.

Heng Shih nodded, then began wrapping the silken shirt around his head.

## ***Chapter Thirty-Three***

The moon's last light was quenched before rolling clouds. The wind raged past the climbers, bearing a scourge of sand that tore at their clothing and abraded their exposed skin. Despite the absent moon, an ethereal yellow half-light, vaporous and sickly, illuminated the storm-wracked sky. Heng Shih could just make out the form of Conan silhouetted against it as the Cimmerian drew himself up the irregular stone wall.

Heng Shih stood upon a narrow ledge, embracing the cliff face beneath the climbing barbarian. He scarcely dared move in the ceaseless wind. Twenty feet below lay a scattered carpet of sharp boulders. The Khitan pressed his forehead against the hard stone, still warm from the sun's rays, waiting for Conan to reach safety and lower the rope.

They had proceeded in this fashion for hours. Heng Shih had entertained hopes that the tops of the canyons would be fairly level, at least allowing for occasional expanses of easy travel. It was not so. The upper portions of the canyon walls broke into a wildly uneven collection of jagged rock formations. They hadn't traveled forward as far as they climbed up and down over the canyon walls.

Conan had chosen an initial approach that took them across the canyon rim at its lowest point, and then dropped them into a gorge packed with huge boulders. Finding a path out of that jumble seemed to have taken half the night. From there they had made their way over a series of steep ridges. Nowhere did the stone afford much in the way of hand or footholds. The two men had developed a pattern: Conan climbed ahead,

often disappearing entirely into the swirling sand; then the rope would come trailing down out of the yellow-tinged darkness, and Heng Shih would clamber up its length.

The far side of each ridge was generally shorter and less steep than its leading edge, as the canyons they flanked grew deeper and drew farther back into the highlands. Inevitably, the men would find themselves at the base of another almost sheer wall and be forced to climb once again. Heng Shih's pride goaded him to keep pace with Conan, but he soon discovered that his skill in scaling stone was no match for a Cimmerian hillman's.

Now the Khitan stood panting on his little ledge and waited for the rope. He blinked through the slender gap in sand-crustured silk. His lungs fought for air and his legs throbbed from exertion. The muscles around each knee were defined in every fiber by pain. Steeling himself, he thought of Zelandra and looked up for the rope. Conan had long since vanished into the whirling sandstorm above.

Heng Shih was all but blinded, but when he shifted position against the rock face to ease his cramping knees, his hand brushed against something. It was the rope. Visibility had grown so poor that it had fallen beside him without even being noticed. The Khitan seized the rope, set his teeth, and began to climb.

As he approached the summit, the huge form of the Cimmerian, loomed above him, etched against the tawny darkness of the sky. Heng Shih dragged himself over the rim, grateful that the stone was moderately level. Conan bent over him and yelled above the storm.

"Are you all right?"

The Khitan nodded and stood, resisting an impulse to check the bandages wrapped around his midsection beneath his clothing. The wound throbbed dully from strain, but he did not think he had reopened it.

The pair stood between two natural pillars of crooked and weathered stone that thrust skyward like the broken, skeletal fingers of some buried giant. Heng Shih leaned his weight against the nearest and stared doggedly ahead, trying to get some idea of the nature of the next section of terrain. He felt confident the canyon they had followed to the Palace of Cetriss was located somewhere to their right, and that the palace itself lay

more or less in front of them. He couldn't hazard a guess as to how much farther they had to travel.

"Look!" shouted Conan, his voice half smothered by the roar of the wind. "The palace!" The barbarian extended a hand, pointing above and ahead of them. Heng Shih tried to stare through the blowing dust.

A dark mass, huge and angular, faded in and out of view in the weird yellow half-light. It seemed less than a league away, yet the space between the looming phantom and the two men was a sand-lashed void that made estimations of distance impossible.

"We'll go down here, along that ledge, and then up atop the palace. We're almost there." Conan wrapped the rope in coils around his brawny arm while Heng Shih peered skeptically ahead, trying to identify the features that the Cimmerian had described. He abandoned his efforts when Conan moved forward, off the level top of the ridge, and down its uneven rear slope. The Khitan followed, keeping his comrade's broad back in view while stepping carefully on the treacherous stone.

The slope bottomed out into a narrow crevasse packed with broken slabs of fallen rock. Conan descended, leaping nimbly from one boulder to the next, avoiding the gaps and irregularities that could trap and break an ankle or even a leg. He made his way along the crevasse floor to their right, with Heng Shih keeping close through sheer force of will.

The narrow passage was abruptly sheared off. The crevasse opened out from a smoothly vertical stone wall into a vast, open expanse seething with windblown sand. Conan crouched on a boulder at the opening's rim, looking down. Heng Shih caught up and stood gasping at his side.

"Below is the courtyard we saw when scouting the canyon!" bellowed Conan. "With luck, that thin ledge running along the courtyard wall will take us to a point where we can scale the palace roof."

The open space of the courtyard was a raging maelstrom of shrieking wind. Airborne sand and dust made it impossible to see more than a few paces ahead. One look down inspired a strange vertigo. The courtyard's floor might have been thirty feet down or three hundred. Heng Shih could just make out the slender ledge that Conan had indicated. It began six feet from, and six feet below, the opening in which they stood. The natural pathway stretched along the courtyard wall, leading up into the storm. Its

width varied, but seemed to afford space enough to walk upon. The Khitan's stomach lurched as he realized that he and his companion would have to jump from the crevasse mouth along the courtyard wall to reach the stone path. The ledge abruptly appeared much narrower to his eyes.

The barbarian set his feet, bent his knees, and then leapt out into open air. He landed cat-like upon the ledge. The Cimmerian put his back to the rock face and walked along the shelf with seeming ease, quickly disappearing from sight.

Heng Shih followed with intense deliberation, perching carefully on the boulder at the edge. He did not look down. It wasn't really much of a leap, he reasoned. A one-legged man could do it if the ground were level. Heng Shih took a deep breath and jumped. He lit on a ledge, but overestimated his leap and struck the canyon wall with force enough to rebound slightly. His hands scrabbled desperately on the stone, miraculously finding a handhold; and seizing it, pulling himself back in tight against the wall.

His heartbeat thundered in his ears, for a moment drowning out the sound of the wind. He allowed himself no time to recover, or to think on how he stood unsteadily upon a crumbling bit of stone suspended above a howling abyss. He proceeded along the precarious shelf, following Conan.

The ledge proved easy enough to negotiate for the first twenty or thirty paces; then it narrowed and became a rising series of sharp and irregular steps. Heng Shih half stumbled on the first, stopped to slap the dust from his improvised mask, and then began to climb. At the fifth step the path narrowed to nothing, disappearing into the cliff face. Heng Shih clung to the rock and looked in all directions. The courtyard's natural wall continued ahead, but without the benefit of the slightest foothold. The stone shone smooth as polished crystal.

Where was Conan? The thought battered the Khitan with the force of a blow. He peered frantically into the roiling storm below. Had the Cimmerian fallen? What could he do now?

Something struck him atop the head. He recoiled involuntarily, jerking backwards so that he almost fell from the ledge. His right hand clawed at the air and caught the rope.

Conan was above him. Heng Shih gripped the line and stared up along the cliff face to where it vanished into lashing clouds of grit. The rock was

almost featurelessly smooth, devoid of all but the tiniest irregularities. These had apparently sufficed. Conan had scaled the wall to its summit.

Heng Shih gave the rope a yank. It held fast. With repeated grunting and effort, the Khitan went hand-over-hand up the rope. He braced his feet and knees upon the slippery rock face when he could, but depended on the strength of his upper body to draw him to safety. The muscles of his shoulders quivered with effort, and he found himself slowing. Dust and sweat stung his eyes. His boots slid over stone, striving for purchase and finding none. Then the rope began to rise of its own accord, reeling him in like an ungainly fish until he was drawn over the edge of the cliff. Heng Shih scrambled onto level ground, released the rope, and stood with his hands on his knees, breathing deeply.

Conan of Cimmeria unwound the rope from his fists, clapped the Khitan on the back, and unleashed a guffaw audible even above the wind.

"Thought you'd lost me, eh? It takes more than a bit of climbing to stop a Cimmerian. Come, we're almost there."

The canyon wall continued only another dozen paces before it reached the courtyard's corner and angled sharply inward to form the back wall of the natural cul-de-sac. They had climbed to the far corner of the courtyard and now stood a mere spear's cast from the Palace of Cetriss. The Khitan found that he could discern the massive pillars of the palace's facade, flickering in and out of visibility between veils of windblown sand. Its outlines shifted, giving it the appearance of a sinister mirage created by the ferocious storm.

The footing was blessedly even. Conan and Heng Shih climbed a low ridge of weathered stone, and passed beyond the courtyard. The dark and shadowy mass that they had seen through the storm now rose directly before them. Their harrowing climb had brought them up beside the palace roof. The uppermost portion of the Palace of Cetriss was fashioned from a section of canyon that rose in a promontory, towering above all around it. The palace's flank lifted from the stone at their feet as sharply as a man-made wall sprang from a city's cobbled sidewalk. Gazing up its face almost twenty feet to the tortured sky, Heng Shih found himself wishing that he could see so much as a single star. Conan walked beside the wall, trailing the fingers of one hand along it. He turned to the Khitan, slapping his palm on the wall and shouting above the gusts.

"It's been worked. Leveled and sanded. Long ago."

Heng Shih nodded that he understood, wondering if this meant the Cimmerian would be unable to scale it. They walked for a few more moments, passing over almost-level stone, with Conan staring ceaselessly up at the wall. At length he stopped, pointing high to a single fissure marring the smooth surface. As Heng Shih looked on, the Cimmerian took several steps back, then ran forward and leapt up at the slender split in the stone wall. His body seemed to fly into place and stick, like a dagger hurled into soft wood. Steely fingers dug into the narrow gap, supporting the full weight of his powerful frame. He writhed, clawing his way up the wall with his fingertips alone. After an instant of breathless struggle, his hands found purchase atop the wall. Then his legs swung up and he was over the top, out of sight.

Heng Shih stood with his hands on his hips and shook his head. He reflected upon how reluctant he had been to allow the barbarian to accompany Lady Zelandra's expedition. He grimaced, tugged the wrapped silk away from his lips, and spat downwind. The rope came tumbling down the wall to him. He flexed his shoulders, cracked his knuckles, and climbed.

The roof of the Palace of Cetriss was as large as the courtyard, rectangular, and bounded by a low wall that reached to a man's hip. It was as level as a floor beneath their feet and patterned with whirling eddies of sand. In its center lay a wooden board as thick and heavy as a tavern's tabletop. Conan knelt beside this anomaly and, as Heng Shih watched nervously, pressed an ear to the rough wood. He rose quickly and padded to the Khitan's side.

"An entrance," he explained. "Probably guarded. Look here." The barbarian went to one knee again, pointing out a collection of odd items in the blowing sand of the rooftop. Five black candles were set in congealed pools of their own melted wax. Each was positioned at one of the five points of a large star inscribed upon the roof's surface. Strange symbols and trceries stained the stone on all sides of the great pentagram.

"I'll wager this is where the Stygian cast forth his image to pester your mistress," said Conan.

The mention of Zelandra drove a surge of fresh energy through Heng

Shih's tired body. He jogged to the front of the palace, motioning for Conan to follow. Gripping the carved rim of the low wall, the Khitan leaned over the courtyard and peered below. The flattened-facade above the great pillars stretched down about ten feet. Below that he could make out the protruding cornice of one of the pillars. Conan moved toward the facade's center, where another slim fissure split the low wall, and began unspooling the rope.

"We'll go down here. We want to swing in between the pillars."

Heng Shih watched as the Cimmerian tied a heavy knot in the rope's tail. Conan stood on the cord and wrenched upon it to tighten the knot. Then he fit the rope into the fissure, wedging the knot flat against the inside of the wall and carelessly tossing the remainder over into the courtyard to dangle in space.

"It should hold, unless our weight tears the knot loose or the stone cuts the rope." Conan stretched like a lazy tiger, seemingly confident and unconcerned. Heng Shih swallowed heavily.

"I'll go first," said the barbarian as he straddled the wall and grasped the line. With a lithe twist, Conan rolled over the edge and began to lower himself down the rope. Sandy gusts tore at him, trying to pluck him loose from the wall and swing his body like a pendulum. The Cimmerian fought the wind, staying in close to the carved stone face. When Conan reached the base of the facade, he planted the soles of his boots against the wall, kicked back, and slid down the rope. Then he swung out of sight beneath the facade and between the pillars.

The skin between the Khitan's shoulder blades tingled as the rope stayed taut and Conan failed to reappear. After a long moment the rope went slack and trailed back into view, flailing loosely in the relentless wind. Heng Shih briefly considered that Conan might have fallen, or worse, swung right into a room full of waiting soldiers. Then he seized the rope and drew himself over the wall.

He slid too quickly down over the facade; its ancient, faded inscriptions rasped his knees and elbows. The rope felt thin and inadequate in his fists. Heng Shih slipped, dropping below the facade and dangling between two of the pillars, which loomed to either side like huge and shadowy sentries. The wind spun him on the rope, swinging him to and fro helplessly. The black square of an open window beckoned to Heng Shih, recessed beneath

the overhanging facade less than ten feet away. Hurling his legs forcibly out and away from the palace wall, the Khitan swung himself under the overhang and up to the window. Deftly hooking a boot over the sill, he pulled himself toward safety. When one fist released the rope and reached for the window's edge, a strong hand thrust out to catch him and drag him in. Heng Shih tumbled into a darkened room, landing on his much-abused knees. Conan stood beside him, his silken mask discarded, a fierce white grin creasing his hard countenance. His scimitar shone naked in his fist. Heng Shih stood and drew his own sword. He and the Cimmerian were inside the Palace of Cetriss.

## ***Chapter Thirty-Four***

The armored soldier thrust Neesa through the portal and into the huge stone room. She turned, snarling in hot-eyed defiance and straining at the chains that clasped her hands behind her back. Zelandra, similarly bound, stumbled against the scribe and staggered for balance. A lance of poignant pain thrust through Neesa, undercutting her rage with sorrow. Zelandra was moving like an aged and infirm crone.

"Are you all right, milady?" she asked, trying to sound strong and unafraid. The soldiers pushed into the room behind the women, surrounding them.

"You were told to stay silent. Obey or I'll slice out your tongue," said the Stygian who had shoved her. He thumbed the edge of his shortsword with crude suggestion.

The tallest of the soldiers spoke in a voice of calm authority. "Easy, Daphrah. The master wants them in one piece."

"Erlik's fangs," cursed the one called Daphrah. "This one threw a dagger into Teh-Harpa's throat as neat as you please. I hope the master feeds them to the lotus."

Wrenching her gaze from the raw hatred in the eyes of Daphrah, Neesa looked around the room. It was massively vaulted and circular, lighted by a collection of strange globes set around the walls. These crystalline spheres appeared to hold only water and some sort of leafy plant, yet they shone with strong yellow light. The center of the room was dominated by a statue the size of a small house. It was a carved sphinx of the sort occasionally seen in Stygia, but it was exceptionally large, fashioned of



glossy black stone, and had no facial features. Between its paws lay a flat slab of similar black stone. Gazing at the altar and its faceless idol, Neesa felt her blood slow and grow cold. What manner of men worshipped such a god?

The women were herded into the room's center until they stood beneath the overhanging oval of the statue's blank visage. Neesa retreated before the advancing mercenaries, halting when she backed into the altar slab. She sat upon it defiantly, curling her lips in a sneer of disdain. Zelandra shuffled to her side, head bent. The lady's silver-threaded hair was bloodied at the crown by the blow of a sword hilt. A cruel leather gag had been fastened about her head to prevent her from casting any spells. Neesa doubted that Zelandra would have been able to work any sorcery even without the gag. Her mistress, seemed taxed by merely standing upright.

Neesa clenched her eyes shut. She should have physically fought Zelandra to keep her from building the fire.

The camp should have been moved immediately, just as Conan had said. They had been taken so swiftly. It seemed only a moment ago that she was arguing with Zelandra inside the tent. Her mistress had been so adamant about being safe and only needing some rest, all the while clinging with hands like gnarled talons to that damned silver box. Then there were voices outside the tent, and even Zelandra, for all her illness, could tell that they were not the voices of Conan and Heng Shih. The women burst out of the tent together, and there were Stygian soldiers coming over the rim of the hill. Neesa had taken the foremost with her nape-dagger and Zelandra had just enough time to bark out a single spell. She sent an incandescent bolt of fiery green light from the palm of her hand into the horrified face of the second Stygian. Then the soldiers were upon them. Zelandra had clawed at her silver box, trying to unwrap it, until the pommel of a sword dashed her turban from her head and sent her sprawling. Neesa drew another dagger, screaming out for Conan and Heng Shih, not quite able to believe that they weren't there. The warriors had encircled her, obviously unwilling to do harm unless it was necessary and wary of the knife she held ready to throw. The blade of a shortsword held to the throat of the stunned Zelandra was sufficient threat to get her to toss her dagger aside. Then she had been struck down by the mailed fist of the one called Daphrah. The mercenaries had milled about for a short time, looking for her companions, whom they shortly determined had fled.

Satisfied that they had captured the sorceress that Ethram-Fal desired, and fearful of the coming storm, the soldiers escorted their captives back along the canyon. En route, the sandstorm fell upon them, railing and screaming in the narrow passage. Neesa had faced it numbly. Her thoughts seemed somehow paralyzed by the fact that Conan and Heng Shih had failed to come to her aid.

Even the marvelous facade of the Palace of Cetriss, wreathed in swirling, windblown dust, had made little impression upon her. The labyrinthine corridors within led them through empty rooms as silent as sepulchers, through a great hall full of neatly arranged cots, and finally to this fearful temple.

Now they waited for the one who ruled here.

Zelandra gave a low moan, grasping at her belt. Dangling leather thongs showed where the silver casket had been cut away. The tall, hawk-faced captain held the box in one hand. He observed Zelandra's distress dispassionately, glancing from her mindlessly grasping hands to the box in his grasp. Rage and helplessness warred in Neesa's breast until it felt as though her heart would be torn asunder.

Footfalls came from the far door. The clustered crowd of mercenaries parted, allowing a small, gray-robed figure to approach. The man was shorter than Neesa and hunched slightly, his head concealed beneath the hood of his robe. His sandaled feet slapped smartly on the smooth stone floor. Drawing to a stop before the women, he considered them for a moment, then crossed his arms over his narrow chest.

"Ah, Zelandra," came a soft voice from within the hood. It held pity and amusement in equal measures. "Your powers of endurance are nothing less than remarkable. I was a fool to underestimate you. But you were the greater fool to underestimate my Emerald Lotus."

Zelandra did not respond, but stared sightlessly forward, one arm crooked about her ribs and the other clutching uselessly at the place on her belt where the box of Emerald Lotus had once hung.

"Ath," called the wizard imperiously. "Loose the lady's companion from her bonds and affix her to the altar."

The tall soldier advanced as commanded, passing Zelandra's silver box

to a comrade, and producing a key from within his polished breastplate.

Terror seized Neesa by the throat, sending a shuddering palsy down through her belly. She crouched and showed her teeth, clenching her fists to fight. The captain drew to a stop, his stern face betraying no emotion.

"Now, now," said the robed man gently. "Don't be a fool. You may still survive unscathed. All depends upon your mistress. It will be much the worse for you if you struggle. Think of what might befall you here if you displease me. Imagine."

Neesa went limp, half swooning as Ath unfastened her bonds. The captain put a hand beneath each of her arms and hoisted her easily up onto the altar. She went unresisting, clenching her eyes closed as he used lengths of rawhide to tie wrists and ankles to the black metal rings set in each of the altar's four corners.

"Very good," said the robed man, then louder: "Now, men, leave me. Be vigilant. These two may have friends. Hep-Kahl, give her box to me. Ath, you may stay."

Subdued grumbles of disappointment came to Neesa's ears. All of her senses seemed heightened to an unendurable pitch. The altar felt much colder against her spine than it should have. She lifted her head and saw the soldiers filtering out the doors. The last stragglers looked behind themselves wistfully.

"Ath, remove the lady's gag. Do not worry, I fear that she is beyond any wizardry at this point."

Neesa kept her head raised to watch even as the muscles of her neck began to ache dully. The gag fell away from Zelandra's mouth, though she seemed to take no notice. Her eyes were dull, staring at nothing. The tall warrior stepped back uneasily, one hand on the hilt of his heavy, northern broadsword.

The sorcerer lifted his hands and lowered the hood. His countenance wrung an involuntary gasp from Neesa. The bulging brow and shrunken jaw marked Ethram-Fal as a man who would never be called handsome, but the ravages of the Emerald Lotus had transformed him into something that could scarcely be called human. Tufts of mouse-brown hair stood out from his mottled scalp. His complexion had faded from the dusky tone of a

healthy Stygian to a grayish pallor better suited to a corpse. The wasted flesh of his face bore an infinitude of tiny wrinkles, giving him the appearance of an animated mummy. The whites of his eyes shone pale green.

"Now, lady, we have so much to discuss."

Zelandra might have been deaf. She stood like a sleepwalker, unaware of the grim tableau that surrounded her.

"Ah, I know what you need," said Ethram-Fal happily. "Look here, milady." With a flourish, he thrust the silver box aloft. Zelandra's eyes focused suddenly, locking onto the gleaming casket.

"Come, a few grains should make you more communicative." He opened the box and held it so that she could see the contents. Zelandra took a hesitant, dragging step forward. Her arms hung lax at her sides.

"Yes, that's very good. You want to feel better, don't you?"

Zelandra took three pained steps toward the Stygian and stretched out her hands blindly.

"So little left," mused Ethram-Fal. "Even so, you shall get only a taste." He used two fingers to scoop a bit of the deep green powder out of the box, and then extended his hand to the Lady Zelandra.

"There will be more if we can reach an agreement. All that you like, in fact."

The sorcerer caught his breath as Zelandra took two more steps toward him, grasped his wrist with both hands, and began to lick the Emerald Lotus from his proffered fingers.

Ethram-Fal threw back his head and laughed like a fiend out of hell.

## ***Chapter Thirty-Five***

The chamber was square, hewn directly from the canyon wall, and without any furnishings. It was obvious that it had not been occupied, or perhaps even visited, for a very long time. A small, hardened drift of sand stretched across the floor, the accumulation of ages. On the far wall a single portal opened on darkness. The storm raged unabated outside,

scouring the window frame with whips of sand.

The two warriors leaned against the wall to either side of the window, resting a moment and taking stock of their situation. The only sound was that of the wind. Conan fumbled beneath his cloak, pulling into view a small, leather backpack that Heng Shih hadn't seen. The Cimmerian opened it and produced a wineskin.

"Here. It is not the finest vintage, and watered besides, but I'll wager that you won't cast it aside now," said the barbarian. Wearing a faintly sheepish expression, Heng Shin took the wineskin. The first swallow seemed to slice through the layer of dust coating his throat. The second filled his mouth with rich flavor. The wine may have been second-rate and watered, but he could not remember ever appreciating a drink so thoroughly. After they both drank their fill, the skin was returned to the backpack and the men advanced as one to the doorway.

Outside the room was an empty, lightless corridor leading away to both left and right. Conan's eyes adjusted to the darkness at once, and he perceived that vacant doorways flanked the one from which they emerged. A moment's exploration revealed that both of these rooms had windows opening out onto the pillared facade, and were identical to the one that had admitted them to the palace. To either side, beyond the rooms, the corridor turned inward and tunneled deeper into the rock.

Conan chose the hallway to the right. Once they rounded the corner, the sound of the storm dwindled to a distant whispering and the air grew thick and stale. The stagnant smell of ancient dust filled their nostrils.

The corridor continued in gloom, uninterrupted for a space, then split in a three-way intersection. Ahead, and to the left, the hall went on as before, with no sign of light or another doorway. To their right a spiral stairway coiled downward. A vague yellow glow, faint as a vapor, shone along the stairwell's curving wall.

Conan thrust down with the sickle blade of his scimitar. The Khitan nodded, and the two stole down the stair. Conan led the way, keeping his back to the wall and his sword extended before him. The stairs opened out onto the second floor, where the two men hesitated. The Cimmerian crouched, leaning into the hallway, but all was darkness and silence. The phantom glow of light came from farther below. He withdrew and they continued.

The stairwell ended by opening out upon a broad hall that led away to the left and right. A single light, set in a niche carved into the wall, filled the long chamber with a soft illumination. It was not a torch. The light looked like nothing that Conan had ever seen before. It appeared to be a hollow ball of glass containing water and a sprig of some leafy plant. The whole gave off a steady, not unpleasant, glow. The barbarian noted its oddity, then gave it no further thought. Death stalked these corridors and would claim the unwary.

To Conan's right, the hall extended fifteen paces before ending in another open doorway. To his left, the corridor reached a similar length to a similar portal, but this one was covered by a hanging blanket of coarse brown cloth. Faint sounds, echoing and indistinguishable, came from beyond the fabric barrier, which twitched gently, as if touched by a gentle breeze.

Conan came out of the stairwell and padded stealthily toward the covered doorway. His boots made no sound on the stone floor. Heng Shih began to follow about four paces behind, but was struck into immobility when the Cimmerian suddenly thrust an open palm toward him.

A voice spoke in Stygian, startlingly loud in the pervasive silence. For a terrible instant Conan and Heng Shih both stood stock-still; then the hanging over the doorway rippled and was thrust aside. Two men in bright mail pushed into view. Lights bobbed, and flared behind them.

Conan had a split second of indecision. It was shattered by the rising voices of an unknown number of men, coming up behind the two that now stood, goggling, in the doorway. The Cimmerian lunged across the hallway, snatched the light-globe from its niche, spun and ran straight at Heng Shih. The Khitan took an involuntary step backward.

"Run, damn it!" The barbarian shoved his comrade back into the stairwell as cries of alarm rang out behind them.

The sound of boots on stone filled the stairwell with rebounding echoes. Conan took the steps three at a time, easily driving past the laboring Khitan. At the second level he slid to a halt, bent, and rolled the light-globe down the darkened hallway to the north. Yellow-white light blazed up eerily, splashing the walls with unnatural radiance as the sorcerous torch rolled swiftly away, scarcely bouncing on the smooth stone floor. Conan didn't stop to watch, but ran past the darkened second level and continued

up to the third, bursting into the dim hallway at the three-way intersection with the shouts of his pursuers loud in his ears. Heng Shih followed the Cimmerian as he turned right, sprinting into the inner reaches of the palace's third floor.

They ran through another intersection and passed an open doorway on the right, but Conan did not even slow his pace. Then there was a curtained opening on the left and the barbarian was shoving the fabric aside, charging into the darkness beyond. Heng Shih was at his heels, sliding to a stop in complete blackness as Conan let the blanket fall across the doorway. They pressed their backs to the wall on either side of the door, ready to cut down any who might follow them. Heng Shih strove to muffle his gasps for breath and slow the rapid hammering of his heart.

Voices and footsteps came to them from an uncertain distance, fading and blurring together. Heng Shih wiped sweat from his pate with the dirty sleeve of his golden kimono. Across from him, Conan stood with his scimitar at the ready, as charged with potential energy as a leopard poised to spring.

The sounds of pursuit dwindled and disappeared. Conan grinned savagely, invisible in the gloom, and lowered his blade. His steel clinked softly against something on the wall. Turning, the barbarian reached out. His hand encountered something smooth and spherical sitting in a niche in the wall. When his fingers closed upon and lifted it, a dull pulse of light came from the thing. It was a light-globe like the one he had seized in the hall below. When he picked the thing up, the water within it rolled about and the light came more steadily. Conan gave the glass ball a good shake, and the room was revealed in the resulting yellow glow.

The first thing he saw was Heng Shih, pressed against the wall across from him, sword in hand and an incredulous frown wrinkling his smooth features. The Khitan extended a hand as if to knock the light-globe from Conan's grasp.

"Easy." The Cimmerian stepped away from the door. "They're chasing the light I rolled into the second floor. With any luck, they'll think we dropped it and are hiding down there. Probably wouldn't believe a man of your size could run fast enough to get this far anyway."

Heng Shih lowered his scimitar, but kept his frown, apparently seeing little humor in the situation.

The globe in Conan's fist showed the room to be an eldritch combination of sorcerous laboratory and unnatural greenhouse. The barbarian wrinkled his nose in puzzlement. The chamber smelled more like a humid jungle glade than a stone room in a desert ruin.

A single small chair stood in the center of one wall, overlooking the many tables that all but filled the chamber.

The tables were of varying sizes, each holding a bewildering array of odd paraphernalia, ranging from racks of liquid-filled vials to a set of flat, metal trays that apparently held only moist earth. One of the central tables held a box fashioned of transparent glass panels bound with bronze. Within the box was a round bush, thickly covered with fat, reddish leaves.

. Along the wall across from the chair was a long table covered with a tent-like drape of thick black velvet. Heng Shih approached the shroud of dark fabric. The sharp tip of his scimitar lifted the fabric from the table and a brilliant ray of golden light shone out, stinging his eyes. It was as though he revealed the desert sun itself. The table beneath was set with a number of unrecognizable plants growing from ceramic pots full of soil. The velvet cowl was draped over a framework of thin metal struts that also held, at measured intervals, several extraordinarily bright light-globes.

Heng Shih let the cowl fall back into place and the golden light faded abruptly, like the sun falling behind a storm cloud. He turned to see Conan standing beside a small table. The Cimmerian had laid the light-globe on the tabletop. He was fastening his backpack and adjusting it beneath his dusty cloak. The barbarian gestured to the black and empty doorway across the room.

"We've tarried long enough."

The portal opened upon yet another dark and deserted hall. Conan held the light-globe muffled beneath his cloak, so that only a dim glow lit their way. They turned to the right, moving deeper into the palace's stone heart. The silence was as heavy as lead, weighting them down.

Ahead, the hallway ended in a high arch unlike anything they had seen thus far. Conan stopped, and drew from his belt the silken shirt he had used as a mask against the storm. He wrapped the light-globe in the shirt and set it against a wall. A gentle, yellow radiance shone faintly through the bundle of cloth. Heng Shih watched with a concealed impatience that



the barbarian seemed to sense.

"Come," said the Cimmerian. "This room is different."

Conan passed beneath the open arch, stepping into an even deeper darkness. The stone floor of the hall ended at the arch. Within the circular room beyond there was no true floor, but rather a ring-like balcony made of a lusterless black metal. The balcony ran around the room's perimeter, encircling an open shaft of uncertain depth.

Heng Shih followed Conan into the strange chamber, pacing soundlessly a step behind and to the right. The pair drew to a halt on the metal balcony, straining their eyes into the dark, trying to see across the room's empty center. Conan laid a hand on the low railing and spoke in a harsh whisper.

"We can reach the other door from either side. But what is that scent?"

Heng Shih frowned in frustration. His dilated eyes could scarcely discern a darker smudge against a featureless background that had to be the far wall. It made sense that both branches of the balcony would meet at a doorway across from the one they had entered, but he could see nothing of it. The Cimmerian's vision was uncanny. Then Heng Shih noticed the scent.

The balcony, only wide enough for two men to walk abreast, bracketed a well of absolute darkness. And from the unfathomed depths below rose a faint odor, reminiscent of stale perfume. After a few breaths, Heng Shih found that its apparent sweetness masked a cloying undercurrent of decay. His hands ached to spell out questions in sign language, but he knew that Conan would not understand.

The barbarian stood rigidly at the balcony's lip, all of his senses focused into the darkness before him. The hair on his forearms prickled. There was something wrong about this room. Heng Shih stared at Conan in dismay, noting the Cimmerian's animal wariness and unable to account for it. The Khitan put his hand on the worn hilt of his scimitar.

Conan's sword lashed from its scabbard, hissing sharply as it cut the air.

"Soldiers. More than four of them, coming to the other door."

Heng Shih started in surprise, drew his sword from his sash and stared in vain across the lightless room. He waited a suspended moment, every sense awakening. A faint and wavering yellow glow illuminated the opposite arch, revealing the room to be about twenty paces across. The scuff of boots on stone came to his ears. He tugged the wooden mace from his belt and looked to Conan. The Cimmerian cocked his head and grinned wolfishly at his comrade.

"No better time to shift the odds in our favor. Here we can take them one at a time. Are you game?"

The Khitan nodded his shaven head, stepping to the right branch of the balcony even as Conan moved onto the left. The pair advanced slowly, weapons at the ready. And then the opposite arch was abruptly full of light and armed men.

"They're here!"

Hands gripping luminous spheres of crystal were thrust into the room's darkness as twelve armored Stygians pushed out onto the balcony. They reacted smoothly, drawing blades and splitting into two groups without orders, moving like professional warriors who had trained long together.

Conan cursed under his breath. There were too many of them, and they were too good. The balcony forced the Stygians to advance in single file. The last man in each line held a light-globe high, so that his comrades could see.

"Intruders," cried the light-bearer on Heng Shih's side, "cast down your blades and be spared!"

Conan's reply was to charge his first challenger. A barbaric war cry resounded in the vaulted chamber as the Cimmerian sprinted forward, closing the distance between himself and his foe with terrible speed. The Stygian mercenary was astonished by this unexpected tactic, recoiling into the soldier to his rear. Conan brought his scimitar down with all the power of his shoulders behind it. His blow dashed aside the attempted parry, cleaving through the steel helmet to split the Stygian's skull. The man fell back among his fellows, dead on his feet. The second mercenary stumbled over the sprawling body, an outthrust hand catching at the balcony's rail. Stepping forward, Conan reversed his blade. His return cut brought the sword back up in a murderous swath that passed inside the

staggering man's failing guard and up through the breastplate to split his sternum. The shattering impact of the blow lifted the man from his feet and sent him hurtling over the balcony in a shower of blood and a mad flurry of flailing limbs.

"Come ahead, dogs!" roared the barbarian. The battle-madness of the berserker raged through Conan's veins, driving him forward with such raw fury that his more numerous opponents found themselves drawing backward in an involuntary retreat.

Across the pit, Heng Shih feinted with his wooden mace. When the mercenary facing him parried the blow, the Khitan's scimitar lashed out with such strength that the man's head sprang from his shoulders and rebounded from the ceiling. The body collapsed like a dropped wineskin, sending a wash of crimson vintage spilling over the balcony's rim. The next Stygian lunged in, only to find his thrust blocked by a precise movement of the mace, and his belly laid open by a sudden slash of the scimitar.

Conan saw none of this, for his third opponent was a man of some ability. Cursing steadily in the name of Set and Bubastis, the warrior traded cuts with the Cimmerian, closing with him over the sprawled body of Conan's first kill. The barbarian's boot skidded on blood-smeared metal, and the Stygian drove forward, his thrust tearing through the patched portion of Conan's mail and searing along his ribs. Conan grunted in pain and, hooking the point of his scimitar in above his foe's gorget, thrust the mercenary through the throat. The blade burst through the man's neck, splintering his spine and lodging in the bone. The luckless Stygian reeled backward with a gurgling cry, tearing the blade from Conan's hand and tumbling headlong over the railing to disappear in the darkness below.

The Cimmerian drew his dagger even as he watched his sword go. The fourth mercenary gave a hoarse shout of triumph to see the fearsome barbarian disarmed. The shout's timbre shifted as Conan dove headfirst into his oncoming foes, slamming bodily into the leading Stygian and bearing both of those following to the balcony in a cursing, writhing heap. No sooner had they struck the metal flooring than Conan was struggling up, wrenching his dagger from the entrails of his fourth opponent. The fifth, fighting for position, came to his knees and awkwardly brought his shortsword down on the head of the rising Cimmerian. The leather helmet saved his skull, but couldn't keep his scalp from splitting under the

impact. Fire-shot blackness rolled across Conan's vision. Stunned by the blow, the barbarian half lunged and half fell forward, driving a clenched fist into the swordsman's face. The blow landed with a meaty crunch and the man spilled over backward with a broken jaw.

Conan's sole remaining opponent scrambled up from the balcony and turned to flee. Hurling himself forward across the flooring, the Cimmerian caught at the mercenary's flying ankle, snagging a strap of his sandal. With a cry of terror, the man twisted in midstride, desperate to escape the barbarian's grip. The Stygian tore free of Conan's fist, but in doing so spun wildly into the railing, which struck him just below the waist. He upended, all but flying over the rail, and fell into the shaft with a horrible scream. There was a muffled crunch from below, as though the man had fallen into a dry thicket.

Conan seized a fallen shortsword in a bloodied fist. Gripping the railing with his other hand, he pulled himself slowly to his feet. The breath whistled between his clenched teeth, and sweat ran freely along his limbs. He looked across the pit to see how Heng Shih fared.

The Khitan stood splay-legged, holding the hilt of his scimitar against his broad belly with both hands. The point of the scimitar was embedded in the chest of the last Stygian mercenary, whose body hung as limply on the blade as an impaled rag. As Conan looked on, Heng Shih hoisted the body up, and with a powerful heave, hurled it into the pit.

The last soldiers had laid their light-globes on the balcony before engaging the invaders. Now the two men looked at each other in the eerie yellow glow. The Cimmerian bared his teeth in a grotesque approximation of a smile. He drew a hand across his brow to wipe away the blood seeping from his scalp wound.

"Crom and Ymir, that was as touchy a set-to as I have ever—"

A terrible screaming arose from the shaft and silenced him. A single human voice strained in notes of an unknowable agony. The hair rose on Conan's head. He drew away from the balcony's rim, pressing his broad back to the cool stone wall, as the screaming intensified into an inhuman siren and was suddenly cut off.

A new sound floated up from the hidden depths of the shaft. A subtle rustle that grew steadily in volume until it was a ragged rasping, as if the

walls below were scraped by thousands of steel blades.

Conan shot a glance at Heng Shin and saw that the Khitan was moving carefully toward the arch through which the soldiers had come. The Cimmerian stepped in that direction too, moving stealthily, and then hastening as the sounds in the pit grew louder and, horribly, nearer.

Something was rising out of the shaft. It moved faster and faster, tearing at the walls around it, until it shot up past the balcony. To Conan's horrified eyes it resembled nothing so much as a tree of surging darkness, hurling its black branches aloft until they crunched against the domed ceiling. It paused there, suspended in the shaft, a tangled tower of rustling darkness, and then it fell down toward them.

"Crom!" The curse was wrenched from the barbarian's throat. Conan ducked and ran for the door, almost slamming into Heng Shih as the Khitan came through on his heels. They ran for their lives down a darkened corridor, while behind them a soul-searing scream was ripped from the man whose jaw Conan had broken. The cry was mercifully short, but superseded by the even more chilling sound of the swift, rasping progress of the blood-sotted Emerald Lotus as it pursued its prey.

## ***Chapter Thirty-Six***

When Zelandra was a girl of twelve, she contracted a fever that came close to ending her life. When the disease reached its critical phase, and her young body was wracked with chills and delirium, her parents wrapped her in woolen blankets and laid her upon a couch on a balcony overlooking the grounds of their estate. There they left her to fight for her life.

The strength of her youth, and the powerful Vendhyan medicines they had given her, gradually won out over the sickness. When she came to herself it was as though she was emerging from a long, winding tunnel of woven dreams. The events of the previous few days blurred into a fantastical skein of unfocused impressions, and she had no real idea of where she was or how she had come to be there. There was only a strong sensation of well-being: the sense that she was well at last and sitting safely in her home.

Now Zelandra felt that old feeling anew, and her stirring consciousness believed that she was back on that balcony in the summer of her twelfth

year. The sensation of emerging from a half-recalled maze of unreal events was the same. Zelandra licked her dry lips and opened her mouth to call for her mother, but found that her voice would not respond. As her vision began to clear, she noticed that someone was speaking to her in a familiar voice. It was a hateful voice. It planted a germ of unease that took root within her, growing and spreading until her emerging awareness focused upon a simple and disturbing certainty. She was not on that balcony now.

Zelandra found herself looking down at her feet. There was a bitter, oddly familiar, taste in her mouth. A frown creased her high forehead as she noticed the dismal condition of her fine riding boots. How had they come to be so battered and dirty? The hateful voice droned on, sounding very pleased with itself. Zelandra looked up to see who would speak to her in such an annoying fashion.

"Are you coming back to us now? Yes, I believe that you are. It is a great honor and a greater pleasure to have you as my guest, Lady Zelandra. First of all, you must tell me, how did you manage to use my lotus so slowly? Shakar, the poor fool, was dead within two days of finishing his supply. How is it that you still have some left after all this time?"

Zelandra stood up straight and ran a hand through her tangled hair. She knew where she must be, though she remained uncertain as to how and when she had arrived. Saying nothing, the sorceress looked slowly and carefully around the huge room, taking in her captors, the black statue, and the bound form of Neesa. Her eyes met those of her scribe for a moment; then Zelandra made herself look away. She could not recall the last time that she had seen Heng Shih or the Cimmerian. She wondered if they were dead. Her lips parted again and when her voice came, it was like the creak of a rust-choked hinge.

"Shakar must not have seen your lotus for the poison that it is. Either that or he took too much at once and found himself unable to lower the dosage. I felt the craving from the start and tried to stave it off immediately. I used whatever power the drug gave me to strengthen myself against it. Would that you had done the same."

"Ah." Ethram-Fal was smiling at the spirit and cogency of her response. His thin lips drew back from green-stained teeth in a loathsome grin that gave his face the appearance of a withered skull.

"Well done, milady. A small triumph of skill and determination. And yet, here you are now, a mere handful of hours from a painful death despite your best efforts. It seems most unjust, does it not? Perhaps this is the time to bargain?"

"Bargain?" Zelandra's eyelids fluttered and she put her left hand to her brow. She had to buy time, both to remember what she could about how she came here and to plan some sort of action, however suicidal. Pretending greater weakness than she felt, the sorceress closed her eyes and rubbed at her forehead.

"Yes, of course," said Ethram-Fal with ill-concealed impatience, "You must remember—"

"You were Eldred the Trader?"

"Yes, yes, I thought that you understood all of that. I came to both you and Shakar the Keshanian in that guise so as to test the effects of my lotus upon you."

"A spell of hypnotism?"

"Ha! Hardly!" The little sorcerer puffed up like a preening sparrow. "Nothing so simplistic and easy to expose. It was a full-fledged glamour: a flawless illusion to any who might look upon it. Behold!"

As the Lady Zelandra watched, Ethram-Fal's slight body began to shimmer like a desert mirage. His image blurred over swiftly, then cleared, revealing an astonishing transformation. Where the stunted Stygian in stained robes had been, now stood a plump and stately Shemite dressed in the elegant silks of a successful merchant. His black beard parted in a broad smile. The illusion winked out and there was Ethram-Fal, grinning just as broadly.

"You see? Such mummary is nothing to me now."

"But the time, the preparations..." Zelandra dissembled. Feeling within for sorcerous strength, she was shocked by her own weakness. The bit of Emerald Lotus given to her by Ethram-Fal had apparently vented most of its strength in merely returning her to rational consciousness. A powerful offensive spell was out of the question. She had to conceive of a simple defensive tactic that would both take her captors by surprise and allow her

adequate time to free Neesa and flee. Her mind raced frantically as she felt the borrowed power of the lotus fading, moment by moment.

"You disappoint me, milady. Either you have used my lotus so sparingly as to be unaware of its true strength or you are much less perceptive than I had hoped. Such spells are little more than child's play to me. The Emerald Lotus has so enhanced my abilities that I daresay I'm more than a match for any of those arrogant, shortsighted pigs of the Black Ring."

Zelandra made her eyes go wide and took on a look of amazement. "As powerful as that?" she murmured. Her aura of awed astonishment served its purpose. Ethram-Fal swelled visibly with pride and continued in more strident tones, while she settled upon a simple spell of blindness and strove to recall the precise and elaborate details of its casting.

"Certainly! You are familiar with the spell called the Hand of Yimsha? It is a simple manipulator that can be performed by any apprentice of moderate talent to pick up small objects and move them about. It is a fine index of a sorcerer's skill. I have read that the creators of that spell were mighty enough to use it as a weapon, and heard it rumored that Thoth-Amon employed it to build his palace at the Oasis of Khajar. Understand this well, Zelandra, I no longer even need to conjure it. It is with me always. And I have used it to kill. Thus far I have seen nothing to indicate that there is an upper limit to the power bestowed by the Emerald Lotus. The more I immerse myself in it, the mightier I become. If you join me, milady, all the power I describe and more shall be yours. Do you understand what it is that I am offering you?" The Stygian leaned forward and lifted his hands imploringly, his tainted eyes shining green as a cat's. "We could become as gods!"

Zelandra thrust out both hands as though pushing him away. Thin streams of gray smoke coiled along the pale flesh of her forearms.

"*Tieranog Dar Andurra!*" her Voice snapped like the crack of a whip, abruptly free of any weariness. The eldritch spirals of soft gray did not seem to extend themselves from her arms, yet the air was suddenly choked with writhing tendrils of mist. Ethram-Fal cried out in shock as the blunt tips of the smoke trails moved for his eyes like so many trained cobras. Ath stumbled away, shouting incoherently in alarm, both hands covering his face. Zelandra kept her hands extended, her fingers working as if communicating in Heng Shih's sign language. On the altar, Neesa began to writhe against her bonds.



Ethram-Fal backed quickly away, dodging the questing streamers of smoke while muttering sibilant syllables under his breath. Beneath the blank countenance of the black sphinx, with her back to the altar between its paws, Zelandra struggled with her invocation, trying to strike her nemesis blind before he gathered his wits or her strength failed.

Ethram-Fal was forced to retreat all the way to one of the temple's doors, and now he stood motionless before it. He no longer sought to avoid Zelandra's tentacles of smoke. They swarmed into his calm face. From the halls behind him came the muted sounds of outcry and struggle, distant yet drawing nearer. The Stygian sorcerer had no time for that. He seemed to relax, his arms hanging limply at his sides, and the chamber was filled with the sound of a raging wind. The strands of the blindness spell were whipped about and shredded in a storm that was felt by no one in the room. Zelandra watched as her desperate bid for freedom disintegrated in a gale that did not so much as stir her hair.

"Clever!" yelled Ethram-Fal. "You led me to underestimate your strength. I salute your power, but this last betrayal is too much to bear. Feel the Hand of Yimsha, milady!"

The last gray streamers thinned and faded, like blood diluting in water, and the Lady Zelandra felt a giant's fist close about her torso. The pressure was immediate and excruciating. Tears sprang to her eyes as the breath wheezed from her compacted lungs.

"Blame yourself, Zelandra! You might have shared the world with me. I-I..." The Stygian appeared almost overcome by a sudden excess of emotion. His wizened face darkened, contorted by hatred and something less easy to identify. "Damn you! Do you think I can't find another to take your place? You're nothing to me! Nothing!"

Zelandra frantically sucked for breath and felt her feet leaving the floor. She was borne upward and back until she hung suspended above the prone form of Neesa and directly in front of the smooth oval of the idol's face. Even through the haze of pain her eyes were drawn to it, fearfully seeking something in its blank and implacable emptiness. Against the black gloss of its face, a deeper darkness bloomed and grew.

"Tribute!" screamed Ethram-Fal, his body vibrating in every limb. "Sacrifice!" His fist shook and, away across the chamber, Zelandra's body shook with it. The Stygian readied himself for the final moment, opening

his eyes wide so as to miss nothing.

There was a clamor in the hallway behind him. He thought to turn and was dealt a blow that lifted him off his feet and dashed him against the wall. His brow struck stone. Pain and blood blurred his vision as he fell to the floor, stunned.

Neesa saw two figures burst into the chamber behind the Stygian sorcerer. The foremost hurled Ethram-Fal aside with a casual blow of his forearm, sending the little man flying like a discarded doll to rebound limply from the wall. A pulse of excitement slammed through her as she saw that the intruders were Conan and Heng Shih. Then Zelandra, freed from the Hand of Yimsha, fell full upon her.

Ath advanced purposefully from the shadows beside the dark idol, his broadsword whisking from its sheath. He moved directly for Conan, who brandished his recently acquired shortsword and spoke.

"Flee, you fool! We're running from a devil out of hell!"

Ath responded with a swift, overhand cut aimed at splitting the barbarian's skull. Oman's shorter blade licked out to deflect it with an echoing clang.

"I'll take this dog," he bellowed to Heng Shih. "Cut the girl free!"

The Cimmerian presented a picture of starkly primordial savagery. His huge body was entirely spattered with drying blood. A sluggish stream of it split his face like a smear of some macabre war paint. His mail shirt was tarnished and torn, hanging upon his mighty torso in tatters. Glacial blue eyes blazed volcanically through the crimson streaking his snarling visage, fastening upon the mercenary captain with chilling intent.

As Ath stared at his opponent in growing trepidation, the barbarian lashed out. The silvery sword darted for the Stygian's eyes. With a speed that belied his rangy form, Ath brought his weapon up and caught Conan's sword between the blade and quillion. With a practiced twist, Ethram-Fal's captain snapped the barbarian's sword off three inches above the hilt. The blade of the broken weapon sailed above the heads of the combatants, falling to strike the stone floor and rebound with a jingle. Ath skipped back to slash at his nigh-weaponless opponent, but the Cimmerian lunged forward to embrace him. Their bodies slammed

together with a clash of mail. Ath's breath, sickly sweet with kaokao, hissed into Conan's face. They grappled. The Stygian could not bring his weapon to bear at such close quarters. The barbarian twisted his sword arm free, dragged the stump of his broken weapon up inside Ath's guard, and buried it in his throat. Then Conan shoved the Stygian away from him with all his strength. The stricken captain reeled away, falling on his back with a crash. His broadsword rattled across the floor and was intercepted by Conan, who took two quick steps, bent, and caught it neatly by the hilt. He snatched the blade up and turned toward the statue, leaving Ath dying on the stone behind him.

Heng Shih's flare-bladed scimitar had cut the bonds pinning Neesa to the black altar and she now stood beside it. The scribe rubbed at her thigh where Zelandra's knee had struck her. Zelandra herself was locked in an embrace with the brawny Khitan, her slender form almost engulfed in his powerful arms.

A distant series of horrified screams came echoing down the hallway. They were choked off almost at once, replaced by an indescribable rasping sound.

"Crom! It follows us! Run if you value your lives!"

"You are going nowhere!"

All heads turned to the doorway that had admitted Conan and Heng Shih. There, Ethram-Fal had struggled to his feet and stood unsteadily, bracing himself against the portal's arch with one hand. The other hand wiped at the unnaturally dark blood streaming from his forehead, then extended, dripping, to point accusingly at the little group.

"Your luck is remarkable, Zelandra. But it will require more than the selfless efforts of your slaves to save you from my wrath. Nothing has changed. I shall—"

With the instinctive reflexes of the true barbarian, Conan chose that moment to charge his foe. The savage, ululating war cry of a Cimmerian tribesman smote the ears of those in the chamber. It froze the blood.

Ethram-Fal lifted his encrimsoned hand toward Conan and, with a gesture, halted him in his tracks. A guttural grunt was torn from the barbarian's lips as the Hand of Yimsha clenched its sorcerous fist.

"All of your paltry physical strength is as nothing," spat the Stygian. "I shall crush you like the useless insect that you are." His hand curled into a tighter fist and the Cimmerian jerked like a man stretched rigid on the rack.

"Watch closely, Zelandra! This fate awaits you, too!" The fist began to close.

Conan felt himself in the coils of some vast and invisible python. Sheets of agony rippled over his straining torso and his skull throbbed, filling his vision with billowing clouds of black and scarlet. His lungs heaved, starving for air and unable to expand. Sweat rolled down his contorted face to drip from his chin. Very slowly, he lifted Ath's broadsword higher and took a faltering step forward.

"Set's mercies!" Ethram-Fal stared in amazed horror as the barbarian took another dragging step toward him.

"Die, dog! Die!" screamed the sorcerer, clenching his fist and squeezing tight. There was a strange sound somewhere in the hallway behind him, but he had confined his attention to the barbarian. This man was damned hard to kill.

Conan felt as if he were walking across the bottom of an ocean. Pressure from all sides threatened to crush his body like a grape in a wine press. Although his sword weighed more than a mountain and the veins in his neck stood out like writhing serpents, all his besieged senses remained set upon his enemy. He lamented the distance that still lay between them while never wavering from his grim purpose. As he shuffled forward another step, his vision began to dim.

"Now!" shouted the Stygian sorcerer. "Now I have you!"

At that moment the Emerald Lotus burst through the doorway like the flood from a broken dam. It bore Ethram-Fal aloft before it, a mere chip upon its tide. The bristling plant-thing drove its bulk through the narrow gap of the doorway and thrust its thorned and flowering branches into the chamber.

The sorcerer found himself helpless on the forefront of a surging juggernaut. His startled cry became a full-throated scream as thorns like black daggers pierced his struggling body.

Ethram-Fal's sorcerous grip fell away from Conan. The barbarian staggered, looked up at the oncoming colossus, and blindly turned to run.

Heng Shih, Neesa, and Zelandra shook free of the paralysis of horror that had held them motionless. The Khitan seized the dazed Zelandra and spun her toward the closest doorway. Neesa followed, turning her back on the monstrosity that poured into the temple as she ran to grasp her mistress's arm. Heng Shih rushed to Conan's aid as the battered barbarian stumbled past him. The great scimitar lashed out at the first, questing branch of the blood-hungry Emerald Lotus, lopping off a section the length of a man and sending it spiraling away. The huge bulk of the vampiric fungus slowed not at all. It bore down on the Khitan with Ethram-Fal, howling like a dying dog, still fastened to its swelling bosom. Spiked limbs festooned with vivid green flowers clawed their way over the altar that stood between the black sphinx's stone paws.

Conan hesitated in the portal's arch, and saw the women fleeing toward safety down the hallway ahead. Then, turning back, he beheld Heng Shih sprinting straight at him with a towering mass of lotus looming up behind.

"Hurry!" roared the Cimmerian, hefting Ath's broadsword with an arm that still ached from the cruel grip of Ethram-Fal's spell. The Khitan shot past him through the arch and Conan followed. The Emerald Lotus hit the wall around the opening with the sound of a forest splintered by a lightning bolt. Tentacle-like branches whipped through the portal, seeking warm flesh and blood.

Conan and Heng Shih ran down the darkened hallway, chasing the shadows of Zelandra and Neesa, who were headed toward a vague and distant light. Behind them the lotus screwed itself through the doorway and pushed into the hall beyond. Its blood-gorged body almost filled the passage. A thousand thorns and branch-tips sought purchase on the stone walls, floor, and ceiling, pulling the abomination along with frightening speed. Ethram-Fal, driven back into the body of the lotus by its impact against the wall, writhed in his thorny prison and screamed prayers to Set.

The four invaders rounded a corner and fled down the length of a long, straight hall. Ahead loomed a pale arch. Neesa had time to sense a freshening of the air before she ran right out of the Palace of Cetriss. Suddenly there was a dark sky above her and a set of steps beneath her madly running feet. She leapt forward to keep her balance, landing with a

clap of heels in the natural courtyard, where two huddled guardsmen rushed to get to their feet.

The blood thundered in Conan's temples and he felt his much-abused body falter. The climb into the palace followed by the pursuit and battle with the guards would have exhausted any ordinary man. Following those trials with Ethram-Fal's agonizing Hand of Yimsha had tested even his iron endurance to its utmost limits. His heavily muscled legs trembled with weariness and breathing filled his breast with flame. Ahead, he saw the running form of Heng Shih drawing away down a hallway that had gone vague and blurred. The floor seemed to pitch and roll beneath him like the deck of a ship in a storm. His balance failed, and his shoulder rebounded painfully from a wall, sending him staggering wildly forward. Behind the barbarian, both the raging rasp of the "lotus and the now-feeble cries of its master drew nearer.

Conan shot through the portal and out of the Palace of Cetriss in a horizontal fall. When he hit the steps, he kicked forward with both feet, sending himself across the courtyard in a headlong dive. As his body struck the polished stone of the clearing's floor with punishing impact, he skidded forward and lay still. The Emerald Lotus exploded through the portal into the outside world. Conan heard muffled shouts and cries. There was a momentary clash of steel against steel; then a woman's voice rose above all.

"Cease, you idiots! The demon has devoured your master!"

Whipping back his sweat-soaked hair, Conan shot a glance over a shoulder and saw the writhing mass of the Emerald Lotus come slithering down the palace steps. The exhausted Cimmerian dragged himself forward, his knees sliding over the smooth stone.

\* \* \*

Through the flowering tendrils that imprisoned him, Ethram-Fal watched the crawling form of the barbarian. As the Stygian tried to call a last curse down upon his enemy, a great, green blossom bloomed from the sorcerer's open mouth, cutting off sound and breath forever. Rowers burst from his corpse.

Conan lunged forward and fell heavily on his chest, driving both hands into the fluffy, gray ashes of the firepit. He groped desperately as the lotus

rose above him in a tidal wave of deadly thorns, verdant blossoms, and lashing branches. The first limbs fell across his outstretched legs. The Cimmerian seized something from the firepit that seared into his palm. He rolled over and, with a savage howl of rage, thrust the red-hot ember into the body of the Emerald Lotus.

The effect was immediate and overwhelming. Scarlet curls of flame erupted around the outhrust ember. It was as though he had torched a dead and dried evergreen. The Emerald Lotus recoiled in a convulsive heave, drawing away from the barbarian and pulling back onto the palace stairs. But a scarlet badge of fire clung to its branches and grew there, coursing over and through its misshapen form. It burned with a sharp, ear-piercing hiss. In a moment its interior was alive with flame and the silhouettes of its victims' bodies were etched in deepest black against the flaring red-orange light. Then the lotus withdrew into the palace like a snake fleeing down its hole. The glow of its burning dwindled down the dark hallway.

Conan the Cimmerian lay on his back, supporting himself on one elbow, and watched the death throes of the Emerald Lotus. From within the Palace of Cetriss came a relentless crashing and rasping as the demonic thing thrashed out its unnatural life within the confines of its creator's lair. Each of the windows shone briefly with fiery light as the lotus rampaged through the palace seeking succor.

In time it was still.

The sandstorm had passed, leaving behind a cloud-swept night sky full of clean, rushing wind. Neesa knelt at Conan's side. The barbarian struggled to rise, and Neesa laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. Heng Shih limped close, using his scimitar like a cane. His breathing was audible as his heavy hand joined Neesa's on Conan's brawny shoulder.

"Lie still," she whispered. "You must rest."

"No," growled the Cimmerian. "I want to stand." Conan stood up, his feet spread wide apart. The night wind cooled his burnt hand and pulled his black mane away from his bloodstained face. He looked across the courtyard at the two Stygian guardsmen, who stood in tense silence, swords clutched in rigid hands. He scowled and, wordlessly, they came forward and laid their weapons at his feet.

## *Exeunt*

Tossing back half the remaining flagon of watered wine, Conan wrapped his cloak around himself, leaned against the gorge's wall and immediately dozed off. After a brief conversation in sign language with Zelandra, Heng Shih followed the barbarian's example. Neesa and her mistress spoke in hushed tones for some time. They cast suspicious glances at the two surviving mercenary soldiers of Ethram-Fal, who sat in dispirited silence. With their employer and comrades dead, the pair apparently saw scant reason to quarrel with the invaders. Sleepless, they sat against the canyon's far wall, awaiting the morning and their fate.

In time Neesa fell into an exhausted slumber, leaning against the shoulder of Lady Zelandra, who showed no apparent signs of weariness. The lady stared straight ahead,

and though her gaze made the Stygian captives cringe and look away, it was not directed at them. She looked ahead to her future and bided her time until the morning. Thus, when the sun drove the stars from the sky, she was the first into the Palace of Cetriss.

The gentle sounds of her rousing woke Conan, who stretched hugely, shook Heng Shih awake, and followed her. He slowed just long enough to cast a baleful glance at the Stygian captives. Behind him, the sun rose with slow inevitability until its fierce golden rays fell into the canyon cul-de-sac.

The interior of the Palace of Cetriss had been scourged by the death throes of the flaming Emerald Lotus. Most of the light-globes had been torn from their niches in the walls and smashed by its passing. Conan picked up one of the few surviving globes and used it to light their way. The cots in the Great Chamber were smashed into scorched kindling. Ethram-Fal's laboratories and private rooms looked as if a fiery wind out of hell had blown through them, crushing and charring everything into black wreckage. Nowhere did they see a human body. Silence lay thick on the smoke-tainted air.

They found the Emerald Lotus in its chamber, as if in death it had sought out the place of its birth. It had burnt down to its twisted core. The lotus was reduced to a clenched coil of blackened, thorny branches gripping a ghastly collection of contorted skeletons. The incinerated corpses of its victims were crushed together in its death embrace, wound and woven into its shrunken fabric so that Conan and Zelandra found it



impossible to tell one body from another. All, human and animal, master and slave, were joined in death. The smoke and intense heat had seared and darkened the chamber, staining the walls as far as the pair could see. The high band of hieroglyphics that encircled the room was obscured by soot.

Conan took the sword that had been Ath's and struck at a curled limb of the lotus. Though it looked as solid as black stone, the burnt branch broke apart more easily than coal, crumbling into loose ash and releasing the skull it gripped to fall and rattle hollowly on the scarred stone floor.

Tearing free a shred of his tattered shirt, the barbarian distastefully wiped the dark ash from his blade. He noticed that Zelandra was staring emptily at the corpse of the Emerald Lotus. She stood still and silent, one arm crooked across her midsection. The sorceress breathed shallowly and did not seem to blink. Conan took her arm and led her away.

The palace's lowest levels seemed to have escaped the insensate fury of the dying lotus. In a crude series of rooms carved out below the desert floor, they found both the stables where the mercenaries kept their camels and ponies and a room full of supplies. There were sacks of provisions, grain for the beasts, and a large collection of tall ceramic jugs of water. They led the animals into the light, where Heng Shih and Neesa anxiously awaited their return.

The Stygian captives were astonished when Conan gave each water and a camel and told them to be gone. The taller of the two stared mutely at the Cimmerian, while the other bowed low, as though he stood before a king. They wasted no time in taking the barbarian's advice and departing down the narrow canyon.

While Conan, Heng Shih, and Neesa prepared to leave by bathing in the plentiful water and eating freely of the mercenaries' provisions, Zelandra quietly disappeared into the palace. When all was in readiness, the three looked about for her. They found Lady Zelandra in the pillar-flanked doorway, her face glimmering as pale as a mask of alabaster against the darkness of the portal. When Zelandra emerged into the morning light, they saw that her body was bent forward and that she used one arm to clutch her ribs. .

"Conan, Neesa," she called, and then more tenderly, "Heng Shih."

"Come along, milady," said Neesa, a faint quaver in her voice. "We've far to go."

"No," answered Zelandra. "I have scoured every inch of this ruin and can find none of the Emerald Lotus. The entire plant has been burnt to useless ash. You must leave me here; I would not burden you with my madness and my death. I have failed and, despite his doom, Ethram-Fal has triumphed."

"Nay," said Conan as he swung his long legs over his camel's back and dismounted. "I must be getting old if a little fighting makes me so forgetful." The Cimmerian bounded up the stone steps of the palace toward the Lady Zelandra, and drew his backpack from beneath a bronzed arm. "I snatched this from the wizard's room of magics when Heng Shih and I hid from his guards."

A long, slender box of polished ebony emerged from the scruffy backpack and gleamed dully in the morning light. Conan twisted the golden clasp, lifted the lid, and held out the open box for Zelandra to see.

The sorceress could not restrain a gasp as she gazed upon a glittering drift of emerald dust.

"The Stygian's private stock, I'll warrant," grunted Conan. "I hope, lady, that this is enough to serve your need."

Zelandra took the box, closed it, and held it to her breast.

"Yes, barbarian, I will make it so."

Together they walked from the shadow of the Palace of Cetriss into the bright sun of Stygia. The Cimmerian lifted the weary sorceress to her camel's back, and the little group moved as one down the canyon that led to the west and away. Conan took the lead, the desert wind tossing his black mane. He did not look back.

Behind them, the Palace of Cetriss returned to the silence in which it had slept for thirty centuries. Its weathered pillars warmed in the rising sun and cooled with the coming of night. Deep within, alone in its high and vaulted temple, the faceless statue of black stone stared into the darkness that it knew so well.