

Conan and the Amazon by John Maddox Roberts

One

The town was called Leng. It lay in the hill country of eastern Brythunia, not far from the borders of Corinthia and Nemedia, at the convergence of two passes that allowed access through the mountains to the plains that lay to the east, west, and south. Once, much traffic had traversed the mountains by way of these passes and Leng had prospered. But trade routes had shifted, and for many years the greater part of the town had lain derelict: a place for the occasional caravan to camp within waits to break the wind that blew without cease among the hills. Herdsmen grazed their cattle and sheep on pastures that had once been the sumptuous gardens of the wealthy merchants of Leng.

But now the town was beginning to fill up once more. Along the passes, in ones, twos, small bands and occasionally larger groups, people converged upon the town from four directions. Many were mounted, some on horseback and others on camels. But some were on foot, and among these, some were chained neck-to-neck in slave coffles. Most of the new arrivals were men, but there were women among them as well.

It was late afternoon when a lone figure strode over the crest of a final hill and looked down the winding, dusty road into the town below. The red sun cast long shadows and stained the western side of the taller buildings a lurid crimson. The walls of Leng were low, constructed of rough-hewn stone. Many of the rugged blocks had toppled from the ramparts, leaving sizable gaps. The massive gates had rotted away and left the town wide open to any who wished to enter.

Most of the buildings that yet stood were close to the ground, but here and there rose towers four or five stories high, once the stronghouses of wealthy families. From several spots, plumes of smoke drifted into the clear sky. A few late travelers entered the walls even as the watcher studied the city.

The man who stood atop the last slope was huge, with hard limbs and a scarred torso bared to the cutting breeze. He wore high, fur-topped boots and a breechclout of wolfskin. Over his massive shoulders was draped his only concession to the weather a short mantle of shaggy goatskin. His wrists and forearms were wrapped in bands of heavy, bronze-studded leather, and he wore a matching belt from which were suspended a long sword and a straight, broad-bladed dirk.

The wind whipped the traveler's straight, black hair around his face, which was angular, as scarred as his body, and as deeply tanned. Only his burning, blue eyes moved as he looked over the town. Nothing else about him shifted. Abruptly and decisively, he began to stride toward Leng.

A hundred paces from the town, the black-haired man, who had come from the north, fell in with a small band of men approaching from the east. They were well-armed and had a predatory look, but they offered him no challenge.

"Greeting, stranger," said their leader, a man dressed in tunic and trousers of padded silk. Both garments and wearer had seen better days, but he carried himself with a confident swagger. "I see that yet another hard-pressed adventurer seeks the convivial delights of Leng!" The speaker wore a drooping mustache and his features were slightly eastern in cast, but his hair was brown and his eyes were pale green.

"I heard that a man without tribe or nation might sleep here of a night without facing a dungeon or a hanging in the morning," the black-haired man said. "Other than that, the place has little else to recommend it that I can see." He fell in to walk beside the other. "Is it in the east as it has become in the north?"

"So it would seem. I am Kye-Dee, of the Northeast Hyrkanians. Turtle Clan. The new Kagan has decreed an end to banditry and suppressed my clan, which has never sullied itself with degrading labor. We heard of this place across the mountains where a man can be at ease, whatever his past. I do not care for towns, but winter comes on apace, and even a bandit must have shelter."

"I am Conan of Cimmeria," said the black-haired man. "I am a mercenary, lately in the employ of a Brythunian border lord. He raised a rebellion against his liege and he lost." He put out a hand and took that of the Hyrkanian.

"Ah! That sort of thing can make a man unwelcome." Kye-Dee shifted his shoulder, readjusting the hang of a cased bow and quiver. The sword at his belt was short and curved.

"So it did," the Cimmerian affirmed. "Such of my comrades as survived were hunted through the hills like so many stags. It was in a hill village that I heard of this place. As you say, winter draws nigh and these mountains are not a good place to be when the north wind blows, unless you have walls and a roof and a fire nearby."

Near the walls of the city they encountered animal pens roughly constructed of sticks and brush enclosing flocks of sheep, tittle herds of goats, cattle and pigs. Elsewhere, peasants in tunics of hairy hide guarded wicker cages overcrowded with chickens, ducks and geese.

"The local folk are taking advantage of the new population," Conan said. "Men who never saw more than a few copper coins in their lives will be demanding silver and gold for those animals."

"Peasants always flock to the smell of profit," said Kye-Dee. He spat copiously upon the ground. "You should see them come out of their hiding places after a battle, to strip and rob the dead."

"I've seen it many times," Conan said grimly, "Only, they do not always wait patiently for men to die. They slaughter the wounded. If a man has no strength left to resist, they may not bother to kill him, but will cut off his fingers to get the rings, or his hand to take a bracelet, while he yet lives."

"They are two-legged swine!" said one of the other Hyrkanians.

Conan shrugged. "Well, they've little reason to love soldiers any more than we love them." He eyed his new companions, many of whom limped as if their feet were sore. "I have seldom seen men of your nation afoot." The Hyrkanians were a nomadic race of horsemen who were horrified at the thought of walking.

Kye-Dee smiled sheepishly. "We were set upon by the Kagan's men a few days ago as we slept. They got all our horses, but those of us you see escaped into the darkness. They did not bother to hunt us, since they assumed that we would die soon without our mounts."

"I, too, was riding until a few days ago," Conan admitted. "A robber tried to slay me from a distance. He was a wretched archer and he missed me, but his arrow killed my horse. I killed him, then I cached my saddle, but I doubt I'll ever return to get it"

They passed beneath the gateless lintel and entered the town of Leng. The low, mud-colored walls of the houses were of a dreary sameness, but the people in the streets were a raffish lot seemingly drawn from half the nations and races of the world. There were men in long, striped desert robes, flowing Nemedian silks, and even a few in the tight, elaborate clothing of Aquilonian dandies. Conan saw hard-looking traveling merchants and men who were obvious deserters from the armies of surrounding lands. There were women in the dress of Zamoran harlots, and other, less fortunate woman destined for the same trade, wearing the chains of slaves.

"A strange place," Conan mused. "It is a ghost town sprung to life."

"My friend!" Kye-Dee said, addressing a well-armed merchant who stood guard over a stall offering unguents, medicinal salves and remedies for man and horse. "Where may weary travelers find refreshment and a roof, and all of it somewhere out of this accursed wind?"

"I think men such as you will be served best at the Red Eagle," said the man, pointing toward one of the towerlike bouses. One side of the structure had been painted with the huge, crude image of a splay-winged bird, its beak cruelly hooked.

"Why men such as we?" Conan asked.

The merchant grinned crookedly. "Because it is the favored hangout for rogues and bandits. True, there are few men of any other sort in this town, but the hardest cases go to the Red Eagle. Achilea herself holds forth there of a night."

"Achilea!" Conan said, astonished. "Surely she is a thing of travelers' tales, not a real woman!"

"Oh, she is real," Kye-Dee affirmed. "I saw her myself once, from a distance. Men say she is very beautiful, and very cruel."

"This I must see for myself," Conan said. "Let us go to the Red Eagle."

As they walked, the Cimmerian called to mind the scattered words he had heard concerning the near-legendary Achilea. It was said that far in the northeast steppe country, there dwelt a tribe of savage women, every one of them a warrior, who would tolerate no men or male children among them. Infrequently, they would take male captives with whom they coupled for the space of a month, then slew in a horrific ceremony. Any male children born of these unions were given to passing caravans or, some said, were slain. Girls were brought up as warriors.

Once, it was said, the queen of these fearsome women was a woman named Achilea. She had been the terror of all the lands around, but her people had turned against her and she was overthrown by a rival. Why this had happened was a mystery, but she had ridden *off* with a few followers and had become an outlaw, raiding caravans, villages and even towns, all over the steppes and well into the settled lands. For years, Conan had assumed that she was one of those legends one encountered everywhere: always some bizarre, fearsome character whom no one had actually seen, though everyone had known somebody who had seen him. Or, in this case, her.

As they drew nearer to the tall building, the gathering darkness revealed lights glowing in many of its small windows. There was sufficient twilight left to see that it had been covered with an improvised roof of thatch. A well and several water-troughs stood before the building, and a number of bones, mules, asses and camels drank there or stood chewing their cud or nudging one another in lethargic boredom.

Conan and his new companions ducked beneath the low lintel of the door and entered. They descended four steps and stood in the main room of the inn. Its heavy timbers were low enough to brush the crown of the tall Cimmerian's black mane, and candles, small torches and lanterns provided adequate illumination. The furnishings were of the most varied sort. There were some long tables with benches, smaller round or square tables surrounded by chairs, and low, drum-like tables for those who preferred to sit upon the straw-covered floor.

At one end of the room was a bar made of a heavy stone slab laid atop massive blocks. Behind it stood a man a little less massive, with tree-trunk arms and legs and a belly that strained the limits of his leather apron. His shaven pate was tattooed with brightly colored flowers, and an upswept mustache framed a broken nose gleaming with jeweled studs. Behind him, kegs, wineskins and clay pots were arranged on shelves amid flagons, clay cups and leather jacks.

The place was crowded, with men seated around every table. Dice rolled in cups, and the counters of a half-score games of chance changed hands along with the wagers. To one side, men cast daggers at a crude wooden target. The drinkers seated just beneath the target ignored the weapons whizzing over their heads.

Most of the men paused in their activities to study the newcomers and then, satisfied, returned to their pursuits. At least one, though, seemed to be offended by Conan's garb, which was uncouth and primitive even by the indiscriminating standards of the Red Eagle. As they passed a long table, the man leaned out and made an insulting show of studying the Cimmerian's scanty hide garments.

"Here's a savage right out of the trees!" the fellow said loudly, "What will you be allowing in here next, barkeep? The goats and the asses?" He sneered, making his ugly face even uglier. His scrubby beard failed to hide the mark of the thief branded upon one cheek by a Zamoran executioner.

"So he have money to pay, he can walk in here naked for all I care," said the man in the leather apron.

Conan paused and turned to face the branded man. "If you do not like my look," he said, his voice low and deadly, "then you may try to change it." He leaned close, until his face was within an inch of the other man's. "That is the brand of a thief I see on your face. When the Zamorans had you, they did not bother to treat you as a manslayer." The blue eyes burned like sulphur flames.

The man paled. Before, he had seen only the barbarous clothing. Now he saw the sort of man who

wore it. "I ... I'll not sully my blade with the blood of a savage," he blustered.

"You can use mine," Kye-Dee said helpfully. He started to unhook his sheath from his belt.

"Enough, Arpad!" barked the barkeep. "You should know better than to prod a fighting man like this one. Put your nose back into your tankard where it belongs and stop bothering my customers." The gigantic man picked up a massive cudgel and rapped its iron-banded business end upon the bar for emphasis.

With a weak show of bravado, the man sneered again. "This beast-man is nothing to me, Indulio. I'll not bother to shed his blood if it would offend you." He returned his attention to his ale, but his face was flushed with shame. The Cimmerian stood beside him for a moment, smiling, then continued on his way to the bar.

"We are hungry, thirsty and weary," said the Hyrkanian. "I can see that you have drink. Have you food and lodging as well?"

"That depends," said the barkeep. "Have you money?"

The Cimmerian and his new companions rummaged through their purses and soon a small pile of copper and silver lay upon the bar. The man named Indulio beamed.

"For this, you may eat, drink and sleep here for three days and nights." With one broad paw, he swept the coins off the bar and caught them with the other. He dropped the handful of metal through a slot in an iron-bound chest that lay by his feet "After that, you must come up with more."

"Where do we sleep?" Conan asked.

The man's thick finger stabbed straight overhead. "There is as yet no one using the fifth floor. Mind you be careful with your candles and lamps. There is nothing but thatch above that The food is preparing now and will be ready soon. What will you drink?"

"Ale," Conan said. The Hyrkanians, learning that there was no fermented mare's milk available, settled for ale as well.

Indulio set the foaming mugs before them. "I've told you to be careful of your fires. There is to be no fighting inside my tavern, and you are to keep your hands off my serving wenches. Otherwise, do as you like."

"I'll abide by the rules of the house," Conan averred. "But that man back there tried me sorely. When I was younger, I would have split his skull before the third word left his mouth. But I am a man of patience and discretion now."

"I've no objection to men killing one another," said the barkeep. "But they must do it outside."

Conan, Kye-Dee and the others found a relatively un-crowded comer and sat upon the straw, tankards in hand. A slave brought one of the low tables from a back room and set it in their midst. Soon a woman whose neck was encircled by an iron ring set a platter of smoking beef ribs upon the table. Another brought cheese, fruit and a stack of flat, tough loaves. All over the common room, hungry men interrupted their games and their boasting to feed.

As he ate, Conan was aware that the man called Arpad was casting dark looks his way. It was obvious that his companions, men as villainous-looking as Arpad himself, were chafing him for his unmanly avoidance of a fight he had picked. The Cimmerian did not lower his eyes. He decided that he would have to kill the man before the night was over. Sooner or later, Arpad would drink enough to reissue his challenge. The prospect did not disturb Conan.

As the tankards were refilled, Indulio left the bar in the keeping of one of the serving women and joined his newest guests at their table.

"You seem to have come far, my friends," he said, settling his great bulk onto the straw.

"Aye, that we have," said Conan. He and his companions related their brief, unfortunate stories. "How comes this town to be so popular of a sudden?" the Cimmerian asked when they were done.

The innkeeper stroked his mustache with satisfaction. "You are not the only ones to fall upon hard times. For me first time in perhaps fifty years, Nemedra, Ophir, Koth, Corinthia and Zamora are all at peace. The kings are taking advantage of the fact by scouring their countries for bandits. What is more,

they are all cooperating in this, so that outlaws cannot merely cross a border to be safe. A half-year ago, I saw the possibilities thus engendered and I remembered this town, which I had seen years ago when I was on the run from Zamora to Brythunia. Even the king of Brythunia cares nothing for these border hills, so I passed the word that there was a safe hideout: a town fully built but almost uninhabited, where men can wait until things return to normal. Then I loaded up a wagon train with goods and came here to claim the best building in the town for my inn.

"After that, it was merely a matter of putting a roof on this place and waiting. Within a few days, twoscore men arrived, hi a month, a hundred more came. Now the town is almost fully populated." He beamed with satisfaction.

"What do men do when they can no longer pay for lodging?" Conan asked.

They move into the many vacant houses, most of which just need a roof. The peasants will fetch you roofing materials for a trifle. The peasants, by the way, are to be left strictly alone. Steal so much as one of their goats and they will run off with their livestock and we shall all starve."

"A good rule," Conan said. "I, for one, never—" He broke off as the door opened and a bizarre group entered the tavern.

First to come in was a squat dwarf who bore a fresh-killed antelope over his shoulders. His short arms and legs were thick with muscle, his torso as massive as a beer keg. His head was larger than an ordinary man's, his features regular and handsome, but marred by a ring through his nose. Behind him came three armed women who carried bows. Hares and pheasants dangled from their belts. Each wore a stripe of black paint across her eyes like a mask. They wore short, sleeveless tunics and deerskin leggings and many small amulets. Their hair was shaggy and untrimmed. They looked more like hunting animals than ordinary women. But the last figure through the door made Conan forget them and all else in the room.

She wore a lavish cloak trimmed with fur and collared with bright plumes. A great yellow mane framed a handsome face of hard planes softened by a pair of enormous, pale gray eyes and startlingly full lips stained brilliant red. Wind and sun had darkened her face except for some old, white scars. One scar slanted from the side of her nose across a broad, high cheekbone to the jaw. A smaller, vertical scar lay to one side of her chin.

When she stood beneath one of the beams, Conan understood how tall she was. He looked down to see if she were wearing thick-soled boots and noted to his amazement that beneath leggings of gray fur that wrapped her lower legs from knee to ankle, her feet were bare. She stood only an inch or two shorter than himself. As she strode across the room, he was struck with admiration. He had seen crowned queens who carried themselves less regally.

"Indulio!" the woman called as the dwarf heaved the antelope onto the bar. "Prepare these for us." The women dropped the smaller game onto the bar and wandered off toward the high-blazing fireplace.

"At once, Achilea," the owner said, springing lightly to his feet for all his great bulk. "They hum their own food," he explained to Conan, "and my servants prepare it for them. In return, I keep the hides and plumes," Shouting orders to his workers, he left the table,

Achilea pulled off a pair of brightly embroidered gloves, revealing broad hands with heavy knuckles. Conan knew that hard sword-training from earliest youth produced such hands. From a shelf behind the bar, Indulio took a silver-mounted ox horn and filled it with ale. This he handed ceremoniously to Achilea. She took it and half-drained it, then went to the fire to join her companions. The men seated there hastily vacated their bench to make room for her and her entourage. From the bench, she surveyed the room for the first time. Her eyes lingered upon Conan for a moment, then swept on. He felt a rush of blood from his heart to his extremities, and he hungered for the woman as he had hungered for few things in all his years,

"What kind of men are you?" shouted an unsteady voice. Conan knew that Arpad was feeling brave again. The man stood and jeered at the woman and her followers. "What sort of men make way for a shameless wench, eh? You think this hussy is the warrior queen she claims to be?" He vented forth a

shrill, neighing laugh. "This is just some northern strumpet pretending to be a bandit who never existed."

Conan could see that Arpad had finally drunk enough to be dangerous. He watched the woman's reaction with interest. The dwarf and the other women reached for their weapons, but Achilea stilled them with a gesture. She drained her drinking horn and tossed it to the dwarf, who caught it dexterously. Then she stood to her full, intimidating height,

"What do you want with me, fellow?" she asked. Her voice was a low, vibrant contralto. Conan found even this exciting.

"Want?" Again Arpad laughed. "Why, I want what every man here wants, wench! To make free with that oversized body of yours! What is your price?" He fumbled within his purse and came up with three coppers. These he tossed at her feet. "Surely you cannot charge more than that!"

For a moment, she looked down at the coins. Then she looked at Arpad. "Our host does not like bloodshed in his tavern." She rapped her knuckles against a beam just above her tousled locks. "The ceiling here is too low for good swordplay anyway. Come outside to die." With that, she walked toward the door and her friends followed close behind.

Immediately the room began to empty as the patrons, eager to view this rare sport, poured out. Arpad exited with his companions slapping him on the back and urging him on. He strutted and preened, a cocky grin on his ugly face. Sighing, Conan stood, picking up the sheathed sword that lay on the straw by his aide.

"I might as well go ahead and kill that fool," he said. "This is about me, not about her."

Indulio put a hand on his shoulder. "Nay, friend. She would kill you before she would allow you to take up her fight. Let things fall out as they will." With the Cimmerian and the Hyrkanians, he went outside.

In the courtyard before the Red Eagle, men had marked out a rough fighting circle with torches. From side streets, others came into the courtyard as word of the unusual fight tore through the little town with terrific speed. Conan elbowed his way to a spot just outside the circle of torches, where he would have a good view of the proceedings.

Arpad stepped into the circle, grinning with false bravado. "Come and meet your master, wench!" His fingers flexed nervously on the hilt of his sword, which was long and straight, with a narrow blade.

From beneath her cloak Achilea produced a sheathed sword. She stripped off the sheath and handed it to the dwarf. Then one of the women took the cloak from her and she stepped into the fiery circle. At the sight of her, the breath caught in Conan's throat. He had known fighting women in his time, and some of them had been more than competent. But never had he seen such a woman as this.

From the densely corded column of her neck, the heavy muscles sloped to wide shoulders tipped with striated half-spheres that blended beautifully into her thick upper arms. The sinews of her forearms rippled as she idly worked her blade in tiny circles. Her slender wrists were tightly bound with bands of black leather, and it looked to Conan as if those wrists were her only likely weakness. Her belly had the definition of a cobblestoned street and appeared as hard. Her thighs were heavy-thewed above delicately sculpted knees.

And yet, despite her incredibly developed musculature, to Conan's eyes she was not in the least masculine. Upon their squarish base of chest muscle, her breasts were full and womanly, as were her sleekly rounded hips and buttocks. A belt of studded leather banded those sinewy hips, and depending from it, a narrow pelt of red fox passed between her legs before and behind. This, together with her wrist bands and fur leggings, formed her sole attire. Although she was clearly of a fair-skinned race, every inch of her was burned as dark as her face, making her pale eyes and golden hair that much more startling. She seemed not to notice the cutting wind.

Conan's heart thudded within his ribs. She was like a magnificent lioness: powerful, proud and deadly. His impulse was to hew Arpad down for daring to threaten such beauty, but he knew this warrior queen would be mortally offended should he intervene. He restrained himself and settled down to watch.

Arpad had lost his cocky grin. Plainly, he had never seen the warrior woman undraped and realized

too late that this was no playacting fraud, but a she-beast fully prepared to take his blood. This was not what he had bargained for, but he had gone too far to back out now.

Conan studied the two. Arpad was tense, keyed up and shocked sober. His clenched teeth and starting eyes were those of a man near his breaking point. He gripped his sword with knuckles gone white, its point raised level with the woman's belly and trembling slightly, his other hand out for balance.

Achilea, in stark contrast, stood almost relaxed, her weight on one leg, cocking her hip into a sinuous S curve, both arms at her sides, her sword almost dangling. Only her head, slightly lowered and thrust forward, revealed that her seeming calm was as deceptive as that of a coiled viper's.

For long seconds, the two faced one another just beyond sword-range. The onlookers were so quiet that only the wind, fluttering the flames of the torches, made any sound. The strain was too much for Arpad's unsteady nerves. He lunged forward, staking everything on a single thrust. His sword lanced out, its point darting for the woman's vulnerable neck, where a wound only an inch deep could bring swift death.

The blow was quick and accurate, but Achilea flicked her own blade upward in a deft circle and batted the point aside. She slid in immediately and brought her blade across in a horizontal, gutting sweep. Her sword, broader than Arpad's, was also shorter by a handspan. With a grunt of surprise, the man bounded back, and the keen edge missed his belly by a finger's width. He jabbed his point at Achilea's eyes and she retreated a step, pushing off smoothly with her leading foot, absorbing her backflung weight with a graceful flexion of her rear foot, knee and thigh, maintaining her balance perfectly throughout.

Now the two circled, crouched, eyes on one another, filled only with the desire to close and cut and kill. Arpad held his sword well to the front, his free hand before his chest, his bent arm covering as much of his belly and rib cage as possible. Conan knew now that he was a man who preferred to use the point. It was quicker and required less strength than edge-play. Thus his stance was more that of a dagger-fighter than of a swordsman.

Achilea held her own blade well to her right, its point directed outward. Her left arm she held wide as well, her fingers splayed. She would use that hand offensively, not just to protect herself. Crouching thus with her arms wide, she seemed to be offering her lush breasts and ridged belly as a gift, baring them to the sharp steel just inches away. It was risky strategy, for Conan knew that even the toughest muscle gave little more resistance to a keen blade than did the softest flesh.

It was not Conan's nature to fret, but he felt that the woman was playing a foolish game. Such strategy might well lure in a cautious swordsman, but Arpad was a desperate man, and he had proven that he was quick. It could be difficult for even a skilled swordsman to protect himself from a fool. Should he essay a full-body lunge, he might spit her through the guts even as she swept his head from his shoulders. A canny fighter never considered a double kill to be an acceptable outcome to a fight.

Arpad seemed almost nerved up to just such a move, and then, abruptly, what little good sense he had took over. He began to wield his blade in short chops, first from the right, then from the left, reversing his direction frequently as he tested her defense for weaknesses. Steel rang on steel as she fended his blows aside. Then she slid forward and her blade moved in a rapid double figure-eight; four blows coming down *right-left, right-left* in bewildering succession. Arpad saved himself only by means of his lizardlike quickness, interposing his own blade just in time but taking two slight nicks in his scalp in the process. After the last defense, the two were dangerously close and he flailed his sword in a backhand sweep, the blow too wild to be deadly, but the flat of his tip caught her alongside the jaw with an audible smack.

They sprang back, giving themselves room to circle again. Both combatants streamed with sweat, and their breath hissed from their lungs. They had been fighting for only a short while, but the exertion of battle is as much in the tension as in the effort. Around them, the onlookers muttered in low voices, impatient now for the climax.

Again Achilea offered the wide-open stance. This time, Arpad was ready to take the offer. His

strength was ebbing swiftly, drained away by his overwrought nerves. With his strength would depart his speed, and death would soon follow. His arm shot out, extending his blade as he flung himself after his point

For the first time. Achilea cried out, a fierce battle shout as she brought her blade across in a vicious horizontal swipe from right to left aiming to halve the lunging man even as she twisted to the left to avoid his blade.

But Arpad had one trick left. With his leading foot, he stamped down in mid-lunge, halting his forward movement for an instant, allowing her blade to sweep past harmlessly as he shot forward once more with a short hop, bringing his edge down toward her defenseless neck.

Even as Achilea's blade carried far past its target, her left hand came up, catching Arpad's wrist, stopping the deadly steel only the width of three fingers from the pulsing vein beneath her left ear. Their bodies pressed together, surging with full strength as each sought to bring weapon to bear against the other. Arpad's left hand now gripped Achilea's right forearm just above the wrist.

Utter silence fell as they groaned and strained, Arpad's hand trembling as he tried to force his blade against her neck, the muscles of Achilea's shoulders and back bulging beneath the glossy skin as she tried to drag her weapon free.

With dreamlike slowness, Achilea's right arm began to rise. First her hilt appeared from between the two bodies, then the blade came free. It looked as if, with tortuous slowness, she was unsheathing her weapon. Only, the blade was black with blood. Arpad's eyes bulged and his breath wheezed. Then blood erupted from his mouth and the hilt fell from his pale fingers. Achilea released him and he staggered back a step or two. Now the onlookers could see the huge wound that slanted from his right hip upward across his belly to his breastbone, the gray viscera bulging out through the ghastly rent. With blood pouring from his insides, he collapsed in a hideous tangle of entrails.

"Slut!"

Conan did not know which of Arpad's two companions had shouted, but both of them were lunging toward Achilea with short swords drawn. With a speed that would have stunned anyone who had been looking in his direction, Conan whipped out his sword and hewed through the neck of one of them. The arm of one of Achilea's women snapped out and a short-handled ax whispered across the fighting circle, its crescent edge halving the face of the second man. Neither of them made it two paces past the torches.

For a few seconds, all was stillness. Then Indulio spoke.

"The action is over. Come back inside and wet your dry gullets!" Quickly the crowd broke up, jabbering excitedly over the splendid fight with its unexpected denouement.

Many shouted compliments to Achilea, but she seemed not to notice.

Conan stood watching while her women tended to her. Her front was covered with blood, and this one of the women quickly blotted up with a damp cloth. Another wiped the sweat off her as her cofferlike chest rose and fell with the rhythm of a hard-worked bellows. With the blood cleaned off, Conan saw a thin red line slanting from her left hip upward across her belly, a mirror image of the slice that had slain Arpad. She had pressed her edge hard against him as she cut, but she had been unable to avoid a slight wound from the other edge of her own sword. Conan nodded with approval. It had been a brave and masterful move. Most fighters would have tried to break away and continue the battle, even risking a severe cut to do it

When Achilea was clean of blood and sweat, her woman draped the great cloak over her shoulders, patting her and whispering low words of endearment into her ears. The dwarf stood by, leaning upon a knotty-headed bludgeon, a smile of sardonic amusement on his fine features. When her appearance was restored, Achilea walked to where the Cimmerian stood. His keen eye detected the faint signs of weariness in her queenly stride.

"It seems I owe you thanks, stranger," she said.

"By Crom, I'll not stand by and see a splendid fighter cut down by cowards!"

"Crom?" she said. "I've heard that name spoken by men of the Aesir, but they swear at him, not by

him. Are you a Cimmerian?"

"Aye, My name is Conan."

Interest flickered in her pale gray eyes. "Conan of Cimmeria? I think that I have heard that name. A sellsword and an adventurer, are you not?"

He gave her a curt nod. "Aye, and the name of Achilea is not unknown to me, although until a few minutes ago, I'd thought you a legend."

"Well met, men, swordsman. These are Payna, Lombi and Ekun." The three savage women stared at him with fierce eyes but did not acknowledge him in any other way. "And this is Jeyba." The dwarf grinned and gave him a sloppy salute. Achilea looked back at Conan. "Once I was a queen. These are my queendom and my army now."

"You are doing better than I," Conan said. "I've not a single follower, and my purse is flat"

For the first time, she smiled, not broadly but discernibly. "Come back inside and join us, Cimmerian. The least I can do is make Indulio let you have some of his better ale."

With a courtly gesture he had learned in Nemedi, Conan indicated that she should precede him. Laughing, she went inside and the Cimmerian followed. Behind them, the woman named Ekun placed a foot against the face of the man she had slain and pried her ax loose. Jeyba the dwarf began to rifle efficiently through the purses and clothing of the three dead men.

Back inside, Achilea resumed her place on the bench before the fire and Conan found a stool and seated himself across from her so that their heads were at the same height. While one of the women went to get her drinking horn refitted, Achilea stretched her long, powerful legs to warm her bare feet before the flames. Her feet, Conan noted, were ••all, high-arched and delicately shaped.

The woman named Lombi returned with the brimming horn and Achilea took a long, thirsty drink. Then, ceremoniously, she passed the horn to Conan. He took it in both hands and nodded slightly over the curved vessel, which he now realized was ancient, its silver mountings worked in curious designs. An ancient heirloom, he guessed, salvaged from the loss of her home and throne. Or else she had stolen it. He up-faded the vessel and swallowed. It was superior ale, and the silver rim was still warm with the touch of her lips.

Serving women set a table between them and heaped it with food. As Achilea began to eat the dwarf returned and dropped a small heap of coins, rings and other ornaments onto the table. With one broad hand, Achilea separated a rough third of the mass and pushed it toward Conan.

"Your share," she said around a mouthful of bread. "You slew one of them."

He pushed it back, "It should have been my fight, not yours. Arpad sought to provoke me and I made him back down before his companions. His manhood was shamed and he looked for a way to redeem himself. He thought you would be easier to kill."

"I fight no fights save my own, and the man insulted me." She shoved the valuables back toward the Cimmerian. "Take it or you will offend me." This time, Conan scooped up the Little heap of metal and dropped it into his belt pouch. The first of the roasted meats began to arrive.

"Share our dinner," Achilea said, making it an order. Conan had eaten a full meal no more than hour before, but a man may always find room for another few bites, and an adventurer never knew where or when he would next eat. Therefore it behooved him never to pass up a chance to dine.

They said little while they ate. The warrior queen and her little retinue fed ravenously, for their day of hunting had sent them ranging for many miles on foot over rough terrain. The bones they tossed to the dogs that prowled the tavern looking for handouts. When the platters were cleared away, they sat back with their ale to talk. After sharing her horn, Achilea had called for a tankard for Conan. It was still the superior ale.

"You seem to be at loose ends, Cimmerian," Achilea said. Is it with you as it is with everyone here?"

"Aye. Cursed little employment for mercenaries and naught save the block and the noose for bandits. Prospects are poor, and unlike lite others here, I do not see this place as a realistic refuge for long."

"What do you mean?" she asked, wriggling her toes in the comfortable heat from the flames. "It seems a good place to rest and wait out the bad times."

"Aye, for a few days, perhaps for a month or so. But things will get very bad here long before winter passes. I have seen it before, in other places like this: Rogues come trickling in, and before long, the place is jammed with men who know nothing save killing and theft. There is no law to trouble them here, but prices are high and soon most of them are destitute. Then they begin preying upon each other, and every man's hand is raised against every other. The more desperate will begin to pillage the local peasants, who will disappear and then we will get very hungry, and there may still be no place to go."

She nodded somberly.

"And it may get worse than that," Conan continued. "When this town is full to bursting, it may occur to one of the neighboring kings to throw a siege around it and bag the lot. If they cooperate in this, they may enjoy a respite from banditry for years to come. This town could never last out a siege from a real army. The walls are low and ruinous, few of the rogues here have the stomach for hard fighting, and supplies will be nonexistent."

He took a long drink and stared gloomily into the fire. "Nay, I'll not wait for that. I'll abide here for a few days, no more than a month. If no good prospect turns up before then, I'll make my way to someplace more promising, even if I have to cross a lot of hostile territory to do it."

"I have always heard that you Cimmerians are a pessimistic lot, and it seems to be true. I feel that you are right, though. This is not a good place to stay for long. Well, something may turn up soon. Let us enjoy it until then."

Conan nodded, but he kept his thoughts to himself: He would not leave Leng without this woman.

Two

The next day, the Cimmerian accompanied Achilea and her minions on their hunt. He borrowed a bow from the Hyrkanians, promising a share of the game should he bag any. After a few practice shots against a straw target, he was satisfied that he had the feel of the weapon and he joined Achilea's party at the stables, where they were caring for their horses.

"So, now we shall see if you can shoot as well as you wield the sword, Cimmerian," Achilea said, running a hand lovingly over the glossy flank of a bay gelding,

"I use all weapons well," Conan proclaimed, grinning.

"What are you smiling at, rogue?" she demanded.

"Arpad did not leave you unmarked," he said, touching the side of her face. A great black-and-blue bruise spread from her jaw line almost to the cheekbone on the right side, where she had been caught by the flat of Arpad's blade. The savage women bristled at the Cimmerian's familiarity, but their queen only smiled ruefully.

"I've been hurt worse, and I'd not trade it for the mark I put on him. Come, let's hunt"

On the plains, they would have hunted on horseback, but the rugged terrain of the hill country made this impractical. To the Cimmerian, traversing the steep, stony land was easy, for he had spent his youth in the similar hills of his homeland. He was surprised to see that Achilea and her women were nearly as comfortable with the ground as he. Payna, Lombi and Ekun loped across the tilted fields, leaping from one sharp crag to another as nimbly and as silently as deer, crouched for speed and furtiveness, heads up, eyes and ears and noses alert for the least sign of prey or enemies.

Their queen was as swift and tireless, relishing the role of beast of prey. She never winced as she crossed the stoniest ground on bare feet. Jeyba the dwarf had to toil, his short limbs pumping, to keep up with his long-legged companions, but the little man seemed to be made of iron and he neither fell back nor complained.

All morning they hunted and they saw abundant sign, but the game was wary. About noon they stopped to rest by an icy stream. The three women and the dwarf crouched on all fours and lapped up water like animals, while Achilea drank more sedately from a silver cup. Conan seated himself across from her and watched her with frank admiration.

"You surprise me," he admitted. "I had always heard that your people were a horseback folk, like the Hyrkanians, whose only home is the saddle. Every such nomad I have known ere now regards foot travel with horror. Yet you and your women move about here as if you had the cloven hooves of mountain goats. How can this be?"

"Hyrkanians!" Achilea snorted through her high-bridged nose. "They are a soft-living people, crippled without their horses."

Conan had heard the Hyrkanians called many things, but never soft.

"My people are not like the Hyrkanians," she went on.

"We do not keep herds of sheep and cattle to feed us with their meat and milk. We hunt for our food, and there are many beasts in our land that cannot be hunted from horseback. We love our horses, but horses die and we would not be helpless when we must go afoot." Her eyes were fixed on the horizon to the northeast, as if she were looking over a great span of distance and years.

"Each year, all the girls who have reached their fifteenth year are taken to a place in the northern hills. It is a great, uninhabited expanse of wild heath, rocky outcrops and dense brush. There is abundant game, but there are also a great many predators. In this land, the girls are left. Each has a sling and a knife. The next year, the survivors are gathered up and a new batch of girls is left there. No, we do not need horses that we may live."

"How many survive?" he asked,

"Usually about half. Sometimes not that many." From her tone, she might as well have been speaking of the weather.

"You are a hard people," he observed.

"All others are natural prey," she said.

The Cimmerian had not thought that there existed in all the world a people as fierce and hardy as his own, but this nation of women had to be very close.

"And what of you?" he asked Jeyba, who now squatted by the stream, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. The dwarf grinned.

"I come from the Border Kingdoms," the little man explained. "As a child, I was made a slave of the Hyperboreans and set to work in the stone quarries with a pick and sledgehammer. It was not pleasant work, but it made me strong." He clenched a knotted fist and the muscles leapt to prominence on his stubby arm. "One day I smashed the pit-master's head in with a sledge and a hundred of us escaped. We lived as bandits for three years, with fewer of us each year, raiding the country manors of the Hyperborean lords."

He sighed, smiling at the memory. "It was a good life, but it ended as it had to. I was captured with my remaining friends and taken to the nearest town for execution. We were led to the town square amid the jeering throng. One by one, my friends were taken out to the middle of the square and bound by their wrists and ankles to four oxen. The beasts were then whipped to the four points of the compass and the men ripped asunder. The crowd cheered mightily at so fine a show.

"Then my own turn came. They stretched me on my back amid the gore of my companions and tied an ox to each wrist and one to each ankle. But no matter how hard they whipped the beasts, I refused to come apart, I did not even grow any taller. So they hitched two oxen to each limb and prepared to have another try. It was at that time that my queen and her followers struck the town. The townsmen fled in panic and I was left with my eight oxen and the sundered remnants of my friends."

"We slaughtered the oxen for food," Achilea explained. She smiled and ran her fingers affectionately through the dwarf's bushy hair. "My women were about to do the same to him, but I stayed them. I thought that one strong enough to resist the pull of four oxen might be an amusing companion."

"Mercy was ever your failing, my queen," said Payna. It was the first time Conan had heard one of the women utter a sentence.

"That is enough!" Achilea snapped.

"Forgive me, my queen!" The woman cast herself to her knees and pressed her face against

Achilea's bare foot.

"Oh, get up," Achilea said, stroking a palm over the woman's head and back as if she were a pet cat. "You are right to chide me once in a while, but I have spared a male life only twice. You need not rebuke me for going soft on that account."

"Do your folk really slay all the men who come among you?" Conan asked.

"Yes, we do," she answered matter-of-factly. "And speaking of kilting males," she pointed across the stream and up the far slope, toward a clump of brush, "I think I see the antler-tips of a fine young stag just beyond those bushes. Let us go and get him."

All afternoon they stalked the stag, who was wary and kept well ahead. As the sun lowered in the west, the beast stood upon a ridge a good two hundred paces away, in clear view, as if mocking them.

"It is too *far*," Achilea said, "and soon it will be dark. We may as well go back to Leng. We'll sleep with empty bellies tonight and come out here early tomorrow. He won't stray far from this spot overnight"

"You give up too easily," Conan said, fitting arrow to string.

"No one ever accused me of that before," she said, amused, "Let us see what you can do."

The Cimmerian raised his left hand, elevating the bow until the barbed point of his arrow was directed halfway between the horizon and the sky straight overhead. He drew until his right thumb touched his ear and the scarlet feathers of the slender shaft lay against the corner of his mouth. Then he loosed. The snap of the string was followed by the diminish-big whisper of the arrow. For a hundred paces, it ascended, growing tiny with distance, turning at the top of its arc and descending, disappearing from view. Seconds later, the stag sprang high, bounded three times, then collapsed.

"You did not lie," Achilea said. "You do know how to shoot"

With swift efficiency, Achilea's minions bled, gutted and cleaned the carcass. The three women and the dwarf ate its liver raw, helped down with draughts of the stag's blood. Even dressed out, the stag was a heavy load, and Conan and the dwarf took turns bearing it across their shoulders all the way back to Leng.

The dwarf carried the stag into the Red Eagle while

Achilea and tier women went to the stables behind the inn to tend to their horses. Conan went with them. He was hungry and thirsty, but he did not want to let Achilea out of his sight.

"New arrivals," she said, noting some strange animals in the pen. "Who came in on mounts like these, I wonder."

The creatures she referred to were a pair of extraordinarily tall camels, of a pale cream color. They were of the shaggy, two-humped breed, unlike the short-haired, single-humped camels of the southern lands.

"They are splendid beasts," Conan said as he washed the stag's blood from his shoulders at a trough. "If you like camels."

"I don't," she replied. "But I admit that they are useful. And they are not bad to eat, either."

Inside the tavern, they went to the bar to collect their ale. Indulio complimented them upon the splendid stag they had delivered, then filled Achilea's silver-mounted horn and Conan's tankard. The Cimmerian blew off the foam and took a drink.

"Who rode in on the white camels?" he asked, setting the vessel on the bar.

"Those two," Indulio said, nodding toward the fire, where two robed figures sat warming themselves, their features concealed by raised cowls. The dwarf stood before them, waving his arms and expostulating.

"Jeyba is angry at them for usurping my place," Achilea said. She walked over to the hearth with Conan close behind. "Peace, Jeyba, I'd not deny weary travelers a place by the fire on so cold a night. Peace to you, travelers. Whence came you?" It amused Conan to see Achilea acting the gracious lady instead of the raffish bandit-queen. He decided it was because the clothes of these two were as fine as their camels. He recognized the wool of their long robes as a sort woven from the hair of the same breed

of camels as those outside. It was matchlessly warm, as light as fog and exceedingly expensive. Their hands went up to push back their cowls.

"We thank you, my lady," said the one with the beard. "Your jester was furious with us, but we thought he exaggerated your quality and rank. Now we see that he spoke only the truth. Please forgive us for taking your place." The two made to rise but Achilea gestured with her hands for them to remain where they were.

"Stay and warm yourselves." She crossed her feet at the ankles and sank down to sit upon the hearth, making even this act seem regal. "'Bui Jeyba is no jester. That club he car-

Conan studied the newcomers with considerable wonder. They were so alike—sleek, dark hair, fine features, pale skin, black eyes—thai they had to be siblings, most probably twins. But one was a man, the other a woman. What he could see of the rest of their clothing looked to be as fine as their outer robes, and the rings, bracelets and necklets they wore were costly. He wondered how they had managed to remain so clean while traveling through these rough hills. Perhaps they had arrived early in the day, found a bath somewhere and changed clothes.

"How did you two end up in Leng?" Conan asked the aristocratic pair. "All the most vicious rogues come here. I'd have thought you would seek out more genteel lodgings, not that there is a wide choice of accommodations in this place."

"Pardon Conan's insolent tongue," Achilea said. "His people, the Cimmerians, are a blunt folk." Conan was nettled at her easy assumption of authority, but he decided to let it pass.

"Cimmerian!" said the woman. Her voice was liquid and beguiling. "First an outcast Amazon queen, now a Cimmerian warrior. It seems that this crossroads caravanseraï is a gathering place for legendary peoples."

Achilea looked puzzled. "What was that word you used? 'Amazon'?"

"It is our people's word for your nation," said the bearded man. "Although until now. I thought the Amazons to be a myth."

"As to why we are here," the woman said, "when we came to Leng, we asked where the hardest men were to be found. We did not expect to find that a woman was the hardest of the lot."

"If you were looking for a nest of thieves, you've found it," Conan said. "I can only marvel that you are still alive and have your belongings. Our host keeps the peace indoors, but you two are fair game when you walk out of here."

"We are not entirely helpless, I assure you," the man said. Conan could see no weapons about them save a pair of identical daggers, their jewel-encrusted hilts tucked into the sash of each,

"Why are you in search of hard men?" Achilea asked The woman named Lombi began to massage the warrior-queen's shoulders while glaring with open suspicion at the newcomers. Achilea rolled her head slowly in sensuous enjoyment

"Let us introduce ourselves," the woman said. "We are Monandas and Yolanthé," she gestured to indicate that me man was the former, she the latter, "of Icaria, in the Rabirian Mountains of Zingara."

"You've strayed a long way from home," Conan observed. The two had neither the look nor the dress of Zingarans, but dial meant little. Many isolated communities were home to people who differed in appearance from neighbors just a few miles away, and travelers tended to dress in whatever clothes were available wherever they were.

"It is a long way from Zingara, if that is what you mean," Monandas said. "But that is no more than a fraction of the distance we have traveled."

"Those camels of yours," said the Cimmerian, "are no local breed. From their look, they're from far to the east of here."

"They are," said Yolanthé. "We abode for some time in Samara, in Turan. Before that, we spent some time in Vendhya."

"You have traveled far for two so young," Achilea observed. The two appeared to be no more than twenty years old.

"We are restless," said Monandas. "Always, we want to see new things, new peoples, new places. We never abide in any one place for long."

"For pleasure?" Achilea asked "Or do you seek something?"

They smiled identically. "Both," said Yolanthé.

"And now," Monandas said, "we must retire and rest." They stood and bowed "It has been an honor to make your acquaintance, my lady." They pivoted slightly and bowed toward Conan, not quite as deeply. "Warrior, good evening. Perhaps tomorrow we shall speak further, if it be your pleasure."

"I shall look forward to it," Conan told them.

The two turned and walked out. As they passed, the men at the tables grew quiet and kept their eyes on their ale mugs or their dice. Now Conan saw how these two had gone unmolested. Something about them made even these men uneasy. Rich as were their trappings, none was so hardy as to assault them. This was passing strange, for they did not appear in the last threatening. But Conan knew well that there was more than one sort of danger, and Monandas had clearly lied when he had said that they were not entirely helpless.

"What do you make of those two?" Conan asked when they were gone and the noise in the tavern resumed its accustomed level.

"They are truly odd," Achilea said. "So alike they must be twins. And the way they speak—first one and then the other, as if you were holding converse with a single person with two voices."

"I like them not," Conan said. "There is something about them that is not right."

"How so?" she asked. "I feel it as well, but I want to know if you saw *the* same things I did."

"They have come a great distance through wilderness, yet they look as clean and as fresh as if they had never left home. Travel as great as they claim should have left marks even upon two so young, yet they do not show the effects of heat and wind, of toil and privation. They look like the children of a nobleman or a wealthy burgher, who have never known hardship in their lives and have always had servants to attend to them."

Achilea nodded. "It seemed thus to me. And there is another thing: Their faces are youthful, their hands unlined and unwrinkled. Yet their eyes are those of great age and experience. I do not know how to describe it, for their eyes are as clear as those of the young and are not set amid a nest of wrinkles, yet they look old."

Conan nodded. "Aye, I understand what you mean. And they still have not said why they are looking for hard men."

"I have a feeling," she said, "that we shall know that very soon. I'll make you a wager that they will make us a proposition in no great time."

"I'll not take such a fool's bet," Conan said. "Anyone can see that they are interested in us. They spoke to no others, unless it was before we returned." He waved to Indulio and the innkeeper joined them. "Those two odd travelers—did they speak with any before we came back in?"

Indulio shook his head. "Nay. They arrived perhaps an hour before your return. They arranged for care for their beasts, then went to sit by the fire, and the men already there made way for them without argument, too. A soft-spoken and well-bred couple, not what I would expect to see in my tavern, but there is that about them that causes men to give them way."

"Did they say they were looking for anyone?" Achilea asked.

"No specific person," Indulio told them. "One of them, I am not sure which, asked: 'Is this where the hardiest men *are* to be found?*' I told them that my patrons are as rough a lot as they'll encounter in any five adjoining nations. They seemed satisfied with that. Then they took cups of wine and went to sit by the fire. What did they speak of with you?" His eyes glittered with curiosity.

"They spoke of travel, for the most part," Conan said. "That they had recently been in Turan and before that, in Vendhya, but we found it hard to believe that two so young had traveled so widely."

"I do not think they lied," Indulio said. He reached into his purse and came out with a small, square coin of gold, beautifully stamped with the image of an elephant. "This is how (they paid for their food and

lodging and care for their camels. This is a coin of Vendhya. We do not see many such in these parts and so I did not put it in my strongbox with the rest."

"They are an odd pair," Conan said. "They make me uneasy."

"Their money is good," said Indulio. "That is all I care about"

Three

The next day, they did not hunt. The stag provided plenty of meat, even with a share going to the Hyrkanians, and its splendid hide and antlers bought them an extra ration of Indulio's ale. Achilea and her followers exercised their horses while Conan sat in the stableyard going over his gear. The encircling walls of the inn protected them from the cutting wind, and the sun was warm upon them.

First, the Cimmerian went over his sword. Its sheath was of dim wood, lined with close-sheared lambskin and covered with oiled leather. The blade was straight and double-edged, with a deep blood channel down the length of both sides. Its short crossguard and heavy, triangular pommel were of plain bronze, free of any ornament. Its grip was of wood wrapped with bronze wire. It was a fighting man's weapon, made for hard use and nothing else. He went over every inch of it, testing its edges for razor-keenness, letting the sunlight strike it from every angle to detect any trace of rust, twisting the guard and the pommel in his powerful hands to determine whether the mountings were working loose.

Satisfied that his sword was in perfect condition, he drew his dirk. Its broad blade was thirteen inches long, sharp on one edge. The other edge was a thick spine, stout enough not to snap under the strain of the most powerful blows. Edge and spine tapered evenly to a point strong enough to pierce mail. Its grip was of plain stag-horn, its pommel a flat bronze cap. The knife saw frequent daily use, and Conan stroked its edge with a fine whetstone until he was satisfied that it would slice a falling hair in two.

With his weapons resheathed, he sat and watched Achilea and her women ride their beasts, so naturally that they seemed to be one with them. In lieu of saddles, they used only light pads secured by a wide, woven girth. They controlled the animals with rope bridles, eschewing the usual steel bit. They did not employ stirrups, but only gripped the horses' flanks with their strong legs.

Already, Conan was bored with Leng. The thought of spending an entire winter in the place was unendurable. Had he been paid off after a successful war, he might have gambled and caroused the cold months away, but this was different. If all he could do was hunt to feed himself, he would prefer to live in a cave. Only one thing kept him here. When Achilea dismounted, he strode up to her.

"I've had second thoughts about abiding in this place," Conan said. "I long to be somewhere else, where there is more afoot than rogues dicing their time away."

She smiled, deepening the scar across her cheek. "A man of action, eh? Yes, I know how you feel. I'd be away as well. The problem is, where to go?"

He stretched out a long arm, his finger pointed south. "There. The warm lands. And it were best to be away soon, before the snows block up the passes."

"How far would you get?" she asked. "That way lie Zamora and Corinthia. There are border guards at every frontier road crossing. Between *them* range mounted patrols. How long before you are caught?"

"I'd rob nobody," he rumbled.

She laughed freely. "What does that mean?" She looked him over as frankly as he had studied her. "You are every inch a villain, and there are a lot of inches to you. They would clap you in a dungeon for your looks alone. No one is going to mistake you for a traveling merchant or a wandering holy man. In unsettled times, adventurers roam at will. In days of peace, anyone without lord or paymaster is suspect."

"You are right," he admitted. "But being cooped up for months in this dull rockpile will be too much for me to bear."

"Be patient," she advised. "I have a feeling that something will turn up soon."

That evening, as they sat before the fire dipping chunks of rough bread into bowls of thick stew, the mysterious twins reappeared. No one had seen them all day, and they came into the common room looking exactly as they had the night before.

"Share our dinner," Achilea invited, gesturing to the table set before her.

They bowed. "Thank you, but we have taken our repast in our chambers," Yolante said. "We will gladly join you, though, if you will permit us," They sat upon the bench, and Indulio brought them cups of heated wine. They cradled the cups of hammered metal in their hands, absorbing the warmth.

Conan sat upon the hearth. "Last night," he said, setting aside his empty bowl, "you said that you sought men of more than common fortitude. To what purpose do you thus seek?"

"My sister and I," Monandas said, for the first time articulating their relationship, "have spent our lives in search of a place, not knowing where it lay. Now we have its location, but the journey is long and arduous, and fraught with peril."

"If the two of you have traveled as widely as you claim," Conan said, "you are not averse to a bit of danger."

"Indeed," Yolante said, her eyes amused, "but we have ways of avoiding violence. This is different. If we are to gain the place we seek, we cannot avoid battle along the way. We cannot take many with us, so those we take must be of superior merit"

There passed a minute of silence. Then Achilea spoke, "It is clear to me that you have a proposal to broach. Let us hear it"

"Have you heard of the lost city of Janagar of the Opal Gates?" Monandas asked.

"The name means nothing to me," Achilea said.

"I've not heard of it," Conan affirmed.

"For many years," Yolante continued, "it existed for us only as a name in certain very ancient texts. It is said that Janagar stood before the ocean swallowed Atlantis, and that it was inhabited for more than five thousand years, growing more magnificent with each passing century."

"But then," said Monandas, taking up the tale, "at the height of its glory, splendid Janagar was abandoned by its people. In a single, strange night, every inhabitant of the city fled and not one of them returned. The tales they spread caused others to avoid even the district; and the land, once fair and cultivated, became a howling waste. In time, even the location of the city was forgotten."

"I have heard other such tales," Conan said. "In my travels, I've come across many ruins of once-mighty cities. What is it about this one that attracts you?"

"Janagar was rich beyond imagining," Yolante said, her eyes aglitter.

"The ruins I spoke of," Conan said, "were probably once full of riches. They are naught but bare, toppled stones now, no more wealthy than this wretched village, the haunt of foxes and owls."

"Most cities decline and fall over time," Monandas pointed out "Usually, they weaken and are stormed and looted by enemies. When the people leave voluntarily, they take their valuables with them. But all the stories about Janagar agree in this: When the people fled, they took little or nothing with them. When the city was abandoned, none ever went there again, and it has been lost to the world of men for many centuries."

"So you think that Janagar still stands with its riches intact?" Achilea asked. She took a long pull from her horn.

"We do," Yolante said. "And now we know where it is. What do you know of the lands south of Khauran?"

"I've never been farther south than central Zamora," Achilea admitted.

"I've been far south of there," Conan said. "What district do you mean?"

Monandas spoke. "What know you of the land midway between Khoraja and the cities of Zamboula and Kutchernes, north of the Styx?"

Conan frowned. "A desert waste as wild and desolate as any I have ever seen. The fringes are prowled by predatory tribes, and the deep desert is impassable to all but caravans bearing plenty of water and food for man and beast."

"And there lies the lost city of Janagar," Yolante said. "It is thither we go. Will you ride with us?"

"It is a long trek just to get to Khauran," Conan said, "That is where the truly wild lands begin. Why

do you not wait until you get there to find your bodyguards, since the two of you are accustomed to traveling alone?"

"In our search for texts containing clues as to the location of the city," Monandas told them, "we found that others are on the same trail. They may have learned of us, as we have of them. These rivals may assault us at any stage of our journey. It is imperative that we have protection henceforth."

"Who are these rivals?" Conan asked, "And how can you be so sure that they represent danger?"

"We have no idea who they may be," said Yolanthe, "but it is well not to take chances."

"What is your offer?" Conan demanded.

"A share in the wealth, once we have found the city. Rations for man and beast for the duration of the journey," Monandas told him.

"That's an uncertain proposition," the Cimmerian grumbled.

Yolanthe smiled. "Is your situation here so attractive?"

"That's true enough, by the Everlasting Sky!" Achilea swore, "At least it sounds warm. Aye, I'll go with you."

Conan mistrusted the two and he did not like the prospect, but he did not want Achilea to get away from him. "I've no horse," he said.

"We will provide your mount," Monandas said. "Are there any other good men available?"

Having committed himself, Conan put his misgivings behind him. He nodded to the small table around which sat Kye-Dee and his five companions.

"Those Hyrkanians seem to be fairly able. They are fine riders and archers by birthright, and they practiced banditry as an ancestral trade. The rest here are scum."

"I don't know the Hyrkanians," said Achilea, "but I will vouch for the rest being scum."

"These men will need horses as well," Conan said. "Can you see to that?"

"We can," said Yolanthe. "Will you speak to them?"

"I will," Conan said.

"You may say that it is a hazardous venture to the south after treasure," Monandas cautioned, "but say no more than that. I do not want our mission noised about."

The two stood. "Tomorrow morning," Yolanthe announced, "we buy horses. We leave before noon." With that, the two turned and left the room. Conan picked up one of the wine cups they had left behind untasted and drained it

"Well, we're in for it now," he said. "Those two are mad."

"What of it?" Achilea said, grinning. "Did you not this very morning say that you wanted to fare south? With two such soft, clearly well-bom persons leading us, we will not be outlaws, but guards hired for legitimate work. If nothing else, it will get us through Zamora and into lands where a raider can ply his trade without so much interference."

"Perhaps," Conan said. He handed her the other cup and went to speak with the Hyrkanians.

The next morning, they rode from Leng, the Cimmerian and the six Hyrkanians mounted upon unfamiliar horses.

Conan rode ahead as they approached the Zamoran border. The putative boundary with Brythunia lay along the crest of the northernmost stretch of the Karpash Mountains, but there the only evidence was a marker stone set up by a Zamoran king centuries before, praising him, his ancestry and accomplishments, and proclaiming that all land to the south belonged to Zamora. In this high wasteland, neither nation bothered with guardposts or border patrols,

The true border lay many miles to the south, where the mountain road led down from the pass and into the fertile lowlands. It was this true border dial the Cimmerian approached as the sun rose on the fifth morning of their journey. A half-mile behind him rode Achilea and her followers, then the twins on their tall camels, and last of all, the Hyrkanians rode rear guard. Mounted once more, the steppe men were happy and content, unconcerned with the uncertainties of the journey ahead, rejoicing in their freedom

from the unreasonable new Kagan.

As he rode from the foothills, Conan saw a crude fort with low walls of mud-brick. From its single, stumpy tower, the royal colors of Zamora flapped listlessly in the lazy breeze. As near as he could discern, he had not yet been spotted. As he brooded over the prospect, he heard Achilea's horses approaching behind him.

"Why are you waiting here?" Achilea asked, reining in beside him.

"I was just trying to remember whether anyone wants to hang me in these parts," he said. "It has been a while since I passed this way."

She frowned. "I never raided in this district. I usually crossed the Kezankian Mountains, far to the south and east of here, and harried the central part of the country. Still, I suppose my name and description could have been spread about."

"We'll have to hope that our employers can talk us through," he said. "If we're attacked—and there are too many of them for us—we ride back up into the hills and go west. We can try another crossing into Corinthia."

"That sounds like a good plan," she said. Minutes later, the camels arrived. The horses snorted and pranced, not liking the smell of the stately animals. Monandas and Yolanthé sat within tent-like structures mounted between the humps of the powerful beasts and as they halted, they surveyed the view before them.

"The border?" asked Monandas. "Good. We wait here while the others catch up, and we will all go forward together." A faint tone came to them. It was the sound of a brass horn.

"We've been spotted," Conan said. The Hyrkanians rode up and watched the proceedings with interest.

"We go down mere now," Yolanthé said. "You will ride behind us and allow us to do all the talking. Let us go." The camels lurched forward and the rest followed.

As they descended the last slope, a file of riders rode from the gate of the fort, the morning light shining off helmet and armor and spear-point. One rider bore a royal banner, its long pole resting in a socket on his stirrup. Foremost rode a pair of officers in cuirasses of bright steel, colorful plumes nodding from the crests of their gilded helmets. As they approached the travelers, the horsemen behind the officers moved from file to line formation, spreading out to block the roadway. They halted, and the officers held up admonitory hands, signifying that the little caravan should do likewise.

"Whence come you and what is your business?" asked the leader as the other officer reached into a satchel tied to his saddle and removed scrolls and writing materials.

"I am Monandas and this is my sister, Yolanthé. We are scholars from Zingara, traveling through your country to the southern lands."

"Have you any goods to declare?" the officer demanded.

"We are not merchants," Yolanthé told him. "As you can see, we have no pack animals save those carrying our gear."

"We must see if any of your guards are on our Apprehend-and-Detain list," the officer said. "Bring them—"

"Wait," said the other officer, squinting toward Conan. He put the scroll he held back into his satchel and took out a smaller one. "I don't think we need the Apprehend-and-Detain list. You see that black-haired rogue over there on the *bay* horse? I think he is here on the Kill-on-Sight list. And that big, yellow-haired hussy next to him is on it as well, I believe." He unrolled the small scroll and scanned it.

Conan tensed and prepared to bolt, but Monandas turned and looked at him curiously, with an air of amusement. Then he turned back to the riders.

"I see no such persons as you describe," he said.

"Perhaps the rising sun was in your eyes," Yolanthé added.

The senior officer looked from the newcomers to his subordinate with annoyance. "What ails you,

Manius? I see no black-haired man, nor any woman; just a pack of scruffy Hyrkanians such as often hire out to caravans as guards."

The other squinted at the little group, bewildered. "But ... I could have sworn ...," Then he looked away and shook his head.

"Too much sun," said the senior officer. He handed Monandas a slip of parchment. "This is your border pass. You must surrender it when you leave Zamora. Be off with you now." He wheeled and rode back to the fort, his riders close behind.

The caravan proceeded and, soon was past the fort.

"How did you do that?" Achilea asked.

Monandas smiled thinly. "As we said once before, we are not utterly helpless."

Conan's hackles were still settling. "He did not even collect your crossing and road fees."

"So he did not," said Yolanthé. "Was that not forgetful of him? Perhaps it is something in the air here." She drew the curtain of her litter and Monandas did the same.

Conan rode on ahead, as was his custom. This time, Achilea rode with him.

"What do you make of that?" she asked him,

"It does not surprise me," he told her. "I said I did not like them, and this makes me like them even less. They are traffickers in magick, and I like that not at all."

She shrugged. "Not everyone with a useful spell or two at his disposal is a terrible wizard. They saved us a great deal of trouble back there."

"Aye, I'd not have wanted that lot after me, not without a good head start But I do not like the way those two handled them. They used no words of power, nor powders nor potions. It was as if they controlled the whole lot with their minds alone."

"I've not seen the like before," she admitted. "It was too much like the way a cobra bewitches its prey by the power of its gaze. Even so, I care not. So long as they do not use their wiles upon us, they may employ them upon the Zamorans all they please."

That evening they came to the first Zamoran village, a sprawl of low buildings and small temples where gongs sounded from slender towers at all hours. Fragrant smoke rose from the altars of the gods, and the marketplace bustled with all the usual activity of commerce. It was not much larger than Leng, but it was many times more attractive.

Just outside the town stood the ruin of a once-great temple. Clearly, the district must formerly have been far richer and more populous to support such a place. The roofless temple covered two or three acres of ground, surrounded by a low stone wall. Its tower rose nearly a hundred feet to a shattered stump, and had obviously once been much higher. Tall, angular statues of guardian deities or demons stood before what had at one time been the imposing entrance of the temple. As darkness drew on, graceful storks flew to their nests upon the tower,

"We will camp here," said Monandas, indicating a grassy spot just without the temple walls, where water gushed from the mouth of a grotesque stone head into a long trough.

"Why not in the town?" Conan asked.

"We prefer to keep our distance from people whenever possible," Yolanthé told him, "There is plenty of water and grazing here. Set up, and then you may go into the town if you wish."

They dismounted except for two Hyrkanians detailed to find firewood, Conan, Achilea and her followers went a little distance away to picket their horses after letting them drink at the trough. The lush grass came almost to their knees.

"She's right about the good grazing," Conan said, squinting at the village. "And I wonder why. Look over there." He pointed to the land beyond the village, where tiny watchfires dotted the rolling slopes. "There are shepherds and cattle herders watching over their beasts. Why are they not here, where there is water and the grazing is so good? It looks as if this grass has not been cropped in years."

Achilea shrugged. "Perhaps it was overgrazed and they have given the soil time to recover. What do

you care about shepherds and townsmen? They are just prey for people of spirit."

"I care nothing for them. It is just ..." he paused, unable to articulate his foreboding "... just a part of what I don't like about this journey." There was a sudden flutter of wings behind them and Conan whirled, half drawing his sword, biting off a guttural curse. A cloud of bats ascended from their crypts beneath the temple.

Achilea laughed. "You are skittish tonight, Cimmerian! They are just winged mice, out looking for their dinner. Speaking of which, I could use some as well."

Somewhat embarrassed at his show of unease, Conan slammed the sword home in its sheath, the hilt clicking solidly against the metal throat of the scabbard. He followed the Amazon, admiring as always her firm, springy stride that never lost its seductive sway.

They left one of the Hyrkanians to watch over their animals while the rest went into the village to break the monotony of their journey. Monandas and Yolante elected to stay within their tent, uninterested in whatever delights the little town might have to offer.

The band found an inn that catered to the caravan traffic and soon were indulging themselves. While far from the centers of civilization, the food and wine available here were far superior to any they had been able to get in the mountains, as well as being much cheaper. The locals watched them curiously, but there was no trouble.

When they returned, the moon was rising above the truncated tower, silvering the growth of moss and vines that draped its sides like a ragged curtain. The stones of the mined temple gleamed softly, their carvings thrown into bold relief by the deepening shadows. A soft breeze filled the air with the sound of rustling grass. The tall camels knelt by the little tent, and beyond them, the horses stood with their heads down. It was a peaceful scene, but Conan mistrusted it.

"Something is wrong," he muttered to his companions,

"You always think something is wrong," Achilea said.

"Everything is fine," said Kye-Dee, weaving slightly, having drunk a good deal more than the Cimmerian, "With grass like this, and no storm, and no soldiers chasing us, what can be amiss?" The other Hyrkanians laughed and agreed. They all carried wineskins and drank from them every few steps.

"I cannot say," he grumbled, "but I shall know soon."

The others went off to find their beds. On such a fine evening, these consisted of little more than rolling into a blanket upon the deep, springy grass.

The Cimmerian, however, was restless. He knew better than to try to sleep while he felt such apprehension, so he sat by their watchfire until all the rest were asleep, and then he rose. Settling his weapons securely at his hips, he walked from the fire.

Something he could not name drew him toward the ruined temple. In the center of the tumbled wall, the pointed arch of the gateway loomed intact, its wooden doors long since rotted away. The Cimmerian passed through, pushing aside the tendrils of vines that hung from the top of the arch.

As he entered the courtyard, a skulking fox sidled away. An owl hooted in the gloom. Except for these, all was stillness and silence. Silent as a ghost, the Cimmerian crossed the courtyard, his booted feet making no sound upon the small, colored flagstones. Once these had formed brilliant patterns and pictures, but the sun of centuries had faded their glory, and in the moonlight, they possessed no more than a hint of their former beauty.

On the far side of the courtyard hulked the temple proper and to one side of it, the broken tower. Through the gaping doorway of the temple and within its long, slit-like windows he saw a dim, flickering light. The windows still, miraculously, held some inserts of red glass, and these lent an even eerier aspect to the scene. Slowly and with great caution, Conan approached the temple, his hand gripping his hilt, ready for anything.

A flight of steps led up to the temple door. These he climbed, his soft-soled boots scarcely touching the stones as he ascended. He paused at the top of the steps and listened, straining his ears to catch the slightest sound. He heard a serpent slithering through a clump of weeds twenty paces away, but he heard

nothing from within the temple. Stealthily, hugging the shadows in the side of the doorway, he went in.

The walls of the temple were largely intact, but the roof was open to the sky. Clumps of grass and weed grew from cracks in the flooring, and the walls were topped with vines, bushes and even small trees. But at the far end of the temple was a sheltered niche holding an altar. Upon that altar burned a number of candles, and before it stood two figures.

Monandas and Yolanthé had removed their swathing and cowed cloaks, and each stood clad in a sleeveless white robe. The man's garment seemed to be of heavy silk. Yolanthé's was of a fabric so sheer that the candlelight shone through it, revealing a lissome figure. The two were going through some sort of ritual in absolute silence. They paced before the altar, made precise turns, raised and lowered their arms in hieratic fashion, their fingers tracing symbols with bewildering rapidity.

Keeping close to the shadowing walls, the Cimmerian worked his way closer to the mysterious pair. As he drew nearer, he saw that their mouths were working as if they spoke or, from the rhythmic way their lips moved, chanted. Yet they made no sound. Their eyes were wide open, but they seemed not to see, or rather, Conan thought, they looked as if they were seeing something other than the ruined temple all around them.

As he drew even nearer to them, Conan left the sheltering wall and stopped in the shadow of a pedestal that rose just above man-height to one side of the niche. Once the pedestal had supported a statue that had stood more than twice life-size—now only the feet and ankles remained. The rest was a tumbled heap of broken stone upon the floor. On the other side of the niche stood a matching pedestal, and its statue was intact, save that it was headless. In the moonlight, Conan could see that it had represented a man, or a manlike god, dressed in graceful robes.

Now the twins turned to face the altar and they raised their arms to shoulder height, upper arms parallel to the floor, forearms vertical, their hands upturned so that their palms faced the sky. Their lips moved in unison, but still they made no sound. Then Conan was aware that there was another person within the niche. He shook his head and stared, wondering how he had missed the man before.

He sat cross-legged upon the altar, swathed in white robes. His face was majestic, with a great silver, fan-shaped beard sweeping down to his breast. His head was covered with a white kerchief embroidered with silver threads. His eyeballs showed only white, like those of a blind man.

The twins lowered their arms and seemed to be still speaking. The man on the altar appeared to answer them, for his lips and beard moved, but there came no sound. The three of them were so noiseless that had he not been able to hear night sounds from without the temple, Conan might have thought that he had gone deaf.

The three continued their eerie conversation, but the Cimmerian was stymied for an explanation as to just what was transpiring before his eyes. Was the man a real man? A demon? A god? Whatever it was, it made his spine prickly, but he did not feel the revulsion that always assailed him in the presence of black wizardry.

Feeling that he would learn little more here, Conan stealthily backed away and made his way out of the temple. The moon stood high, and in the distance he could see the herdsmen's watchfires. He stopped by their own fire and took one of the wineskins left there by the Hyrkanians. With this slung from his shoulder, he walked toward the nearest of the herdsmen's fires. As he crossed the plain, he heard something walking parallel to him, and an errant breeze brought the scent of wolf to his nose. It caused him no concern. No wolf was going to attack a man when there were sheep and calves about.

When he strode within the light of the fire, the herdsmen gasped and snatched up their spears, scrambling to their feet.

"Who be you?" demanded a grizzle-bearded man dressed in rough leathers. His companions were a somewhat younger man and a boy in his early teens. The tip of the boy's spear trembled slightly, but the men held their weapons steady, their expressions grim. Conan had been a herdsman in his youth, and he knew the occupation was not a task for the fainthearted, not in a land where wolves, bears and lions were plentiful.

"A friend," Conan said, holding up the wineskin. "I am camped with my companions by the old temple."

"So you are one of the fools," said the younger man. Satisfied that Conan was alone, they lowered their weapons.

"Fools? What mean you?"

The older man accepted the proffered skin. "Come, share our fire. He said that because you have pitched camp in an accursed place." There were logs arranged around a stone-lined fire pit, and the three herdsmen sat on one log while Conan took the one facing them.

"I thought as much when I saw how high the grass was and how plentiful the water. That is not something you see often in grazing land such as this."

"Aye," said the younger man. "It is a tempting sight, is it not? But we know better than to use it." Each in turn, the three took a pull at the skin and the boy passed to back to Conan. He took a drink and handed it to the elder.

"How do you keep your beasts from straying onto the grass? I saw no fence there."

"We need not restrain them," said the grizzle-bearded man, "for they cannot be *forced* onto that land."

"That is true," said the younger. "Cattle and sheep will eat the grass within five hundred paces of the accursed temple, but they will not go one step farther, nor take so much as a mouthful from the other side of the line. Look at it in the daylight, stranger: The ungrazed grass forms a perfect square, the line straight as one laid out by a builder stretching a string between two stakes."

"How came this to be?" asked the Cimmerian.

"It is said," the bearded man told him, "that Ardubal the Ninth, the great king who reigned over Zamora many, many years ago, offended the gods in his quest for wizardly knowledge. He carried out terrible rituals in that very temple. One night, at the height of his glory, Ardubal sacrificed a thousand men upon the altar of that temple, Nemedian prisoners captured in battle. The gods, angered at his impiety and his infamous behavior, destroyed the temple and the king and laid the very precincts under a curse. Zamora fell to the Nemedians, and we lived beneath their yoke for a generation."

"Aye, that is the tale," said the younger man. The boy, from whom Conan had yet to hear a word, merely nodded.

He was not satisfied with the tale, but he felt sure he would hear nothing better from these men. When the wineskin was empty, he made his way back to the camp and rolled into a blanket to sleep. Accursed or not, the thought, the dense, springy grass made a fine, soft bed.

The next morning, as they broke camp and prepared to march, Conan approached the twins and called to their attention the singular square of high grass.

"Odd, is it not?" Monandas commented. "And yet, the world is full of little mysteries such as this."

"Last night I heard a tale about this place," Conan said, and told them what he had learned from the herdsmen, omitting the detail of having spied upon the two within the temple before seeking out the local men.

Both laughed and Yolante spoke. "Peasants always have a story to explain uncanny things in their neighborhood. Usually, these explanations involve some famous personage of the past. In these parts, it is always Ardubal the Ninth, who was a great king but who in the end lost Zamora to the Nemedians."

"Did he truly practice evil arts?" Conan asked.

"Who knows?" Monandas said, shrugging. "But he had naught to do with this temple. To peasants, anything that happened before their grandsires' time is remotest antiquity, and in their tales, persons and events separated by centuries are all contemporary. In truth, Ardubal the Ninth reigned a mere three hundred years ago. Yet anyone who has traveled and surveyed many ruins can tell that this temple," he swept out an arm to take in the tatty precincts, "has lain derelict for more than a thousand years."

Conan studied the place in light of these words, "Aye," he admitted, "this place was built solidly. It took more than three hundred years for so many stones to topple, and to put full-grown trees atop the

walls." He considered the prospect. "Then what think you happened here?"

"What makes you so curious?" Yolanthé asked.

"Because none of the local animals will eat this grass," Conan said. "But ours have been cropping it happily, and drinking the water. How can this be?"

Monandas frowned. "They seem to have suffered no harm thereby. We hired you as a guard and because you know the southern lands, Cimmerian. You need not concern yourself with these trifling matters. And now I think it best for you to see to your own mount. We depart within the hour."

"As you wish," Conan said. He wanted to know what the two had been up to, but he knew that he would learn no more at this time. As he walked away, the twins looked after him, their expressions enigmatic.

Four

Their journey southward into the southern lowlands brought them to warmer climes. Much of the land was cultivated, but there was also much wilderness, with abundant wild game. Since Conan, the Hyrkanians and Achilea's party were all accomplished hunters, they seldom had to purchase provisions and thus were able to avoid large towns where they might be questioned. The little caravan passed midway between Shadizar and Arenjun and within a few days came to the border of Koth.

Since the incident in the ruined temple, there had been no more supernatural demonstrations, but the Cimmerian was still wary of their employers. His other companions seemed to have no such qualms and were happy with the change of climate, the regular and plentiful meals and the absence of pursuers.

Had it not been for his instinctive aversion to magickal doings, Conan himself would have felt that he had fallen into a most fortunate situation. But the surpassingly strange thing he had witnessed put him on his guard, and the aloof twins' odd mission troubled him as well. Their treasure-hunt seemed to him a fool's errand.

Another thing galled Conan. His attempts to draw Achilea into closer intimacy had been met with unflinching rebuffs. Unlike most women, she seemed to be unimpressed by his physical charms. If she admired his warrior accomplishments, she hid it well. To make matters worse, the three women and the dwarf never strayed far from her side. Any time he drew close to her, they drew even closer, hands on their weapons. They were prepared to cut him down at the first sign of threat, and he suspected that the wild women, at least, would consider the mildest amatory gesture to be a killing matter.

They came to the border between Zamora and Koth, near the eastern extremity of the latter nation: a district of semi-arid grassland given over to great herds of shaggy, huge-horned cattle tended by riders scarcely less brutish than their four-footed charges. The watchers at the border gave them no trouble, for now they were in land where neither kings nor local chieftains paid much heed to the wild men who preyed upon travelers or more settled folk.

"From here on, we keep our bows strung and arrows ready," Conan said as they crossed into Koth. "And we double the watch at night. This territory is rife with raiders and bandits of all sorts, but they will keep their distance from a party that is alert and well-armed, especially since it is plain that we bear no great treasure with us."

"Who made you our leader, Cimmerian?" growled Jeyba the dwarf.

"Aye!" chorused all three of the savage women, jealous as always of their queen's authority.

"Hee, hee!" cried Kye-Dee in his high-pitched laugh. "A mutiny of women and dwarfs! Surely this is something from an old fable!" The women and the dwarf reached for their weapons.

"Stop this!" Achilea snapped. Instantly, her followers froze. "The rogue presumes too much, but there is naught amiss with his advice. Now, when the danger grows, we must not bicker among ourselves."

"Then, by Crom," Conan fumed, "just who is in charge here? When raiders strike us at midnight, that will be no time to dispute authority!"

The twins, tented within their camelback abodes, seemed to be taking no notice, but at the Cimmerian's last words, they thrust their heads from behind their curtains with their usual disconcerting

simultaneity.

"We will provide all the necessary orders," Monandas said. "Do not forget who are your employers."

"Aye, but you are not warriors," Conan said. "One of us should have the captaincy of your guard."

"Then," Yolante said, "we choose Achilea. She is, after all, of royal blood." If she meant this ironically, she gave no sign.

"Very well," Conan said, still fuming. "Since you would rather have breeding than warrior experience, so be it."

It was at that moment that the raiders struck them. A file of horsemen came galloping from behind a knoll, waving their weapons and rending the air with shrill war cries.

"I await your orders. Commander," Conan said to the astonished Achilea.

She seemed to shake off the momentary surprise and rose in her stirrups to survey the terrain. The raiders were riding in fast from their left. She pointed to a rise of ground nearby to their right, next to a deep gully.

"Ride for that knoll and we'll have the high ground of them! Camels in the middle and the rest of us will circle them, with the gully to our back."

"That's a mistake," Conan said, "but go ahead. I'll slow them down."

"No! Stay with us!" Achilea cried, but the Cimmerian was already spurring toward the attackers. Cursing, she seized the bridle of one of the tall camels and signaled the dwarf to do the same with the other. They began to ride toward the high ground while the Hyrkanians formed a screen between them and the raiders. The mercenaries spurred their horses into curving and zigzagging maneuvers as they plied their bows, for Hyrkanians never fought standing still.

The distance was closing fast, but as he rode, Conan made a quick evaluation of the raiders. There were perhaps a score of them, most wearing the garb of Kothian plainsmen, but even among these, he recognized the distinctive robes and headdresses of several tribes. There were Khorajans and Khauranians, and he saw at least one man in the armor of a Zamoran light-cavalryman. Outlaws, outcasts and deserters, he thought, not a warrior tribe.

The nearest rider lowered his lance point toward Conan and spurred his horse to greater speed. With the shaft tucked tightly beneath his arm, he leaned well to the right, his shield of beaten steel held high to ward against a counter blow. His face was twisted with the exultant glee of an easy kill, for he could see that his opponent had no lance.

Conan did not spur his mount to higher speed, for it was not a trained warhorse. Instead, he drew his sword and kept his eyes on the advancing lance point. As it approached within a few feet, he bent low. The instant the sharp steel passed over him, he straightened, raising the wooden shaft and creating a wide opening beneath the raised shield. Gripping his sword in both hands, he brought the blade across horizontally, shearing through the raider's light breastplate, crunching past the ribs, biting into the vitals. His sword came free in a spray of blood as he rode past and looked for another victim.

Even as he scanned the raiders, two of them toppled from their mounts, felled by Hyrkanian arrows. The rest were clearly astonished. Their supposed victims were not going to be the easy meat they had anticipated. The two nearest him swerved aside, but Conan swerved along with one of them. As he spurred within arm's length, the man looked back over his shoulder and had only a moment to stare in horror as Conan's blade descended, chopping through his spine like a woodman's ax through a sapling. The wretch toppled from his saddle and the Cimmerian turned his attention to the rest. They were keeping their distance from this alarming, black-haired horseman and were charging the knoll instead.

There Conan saw what he had expected to see. Achilea, the twins and the rest had just gained the top of the small rise—to find that they were not the only ones there.

"Foolish, arrogant wench!" Conan muttered as he reined his horse toward the knoll and kicked it to a full gallop.

Atop the mound, the riders had been surprised by another band of outlaws, these lying in wait in the

gully that ran around the base of the little rise. Sixteen men, mounted upon small, swift horses, charged from the gully toward the knot of riders on the high ground. With lances leveled, they made straight for the two camels.

Achilea and her followers stayed close to the tall beasts. The three savage women plied their bows, while Achilea and the dwarf engaged any who drew too near. The queen's sword flashed, parting flesh with every stroke. Jeyba's bludgeon rose and fell, smashing bones, scattering brains. The Hyrkanians, who disliked hand-to-hand fighting, dispersed, keeping well out of lance-range and sending in their deadly arrows at every opportunity.

Then Conan came storming up the rise, his blade whirling like a great steel windmill. A bandit spurred toward one of the camels, adroitly evading Achilea's slashing sword. Just as his hand grasped the curtain of Yolante's shelter, the Cimmerian's sword flashed down, severing the hand at the wrist. The man turned, gaping, only to see the blade descend once more, this time to split his skull.

The raiders had had enough. With howls of frustration, the survivors wheeled and fled, the Hyrkanians close upon their heels, happily firing arrows at the exposed backs.

"Stop and come back here!" Achilea cried. The Hyrkanians either did not hear her or simply ignored her order.

"Have we lost any?" Conan asked, wiping his blade.

Achilea looked at her women and the dwarf, who likewise cleaned bloodied weapons. "I've lost none, and you seem to be in one piece, I'll not speak for the Hyrkanians until they return, the mutinous dogs."

"The Hyrkanians have a saying," Conan said with a smile. "'There is no fairer sight beneath the Everlasting Sky than a foe's back within arrow-range.'"

Yolante pushed her curtain aside, ignoring the bandit's severed hand, which still gripped it next to her face. "Is all well?" Her expression was perfectly serene, her voice as tranquil as ever.

"We told you that we would protect you," Achilea said, her face still furious.

"And yet," Monandas added, thrusting his head through his curtains, "just before the assault, you were exchanging words of a certain pertinence. Conan, did you not tell Achilea that riding to this knoll was a mistake?"

"I did," Conan averred.

"And wherefore said you that?" Yolante said sweetly.

"We are twelve armed guards," Conan said. "Any could see that no more than a score rode toward us. Scum like that want at least three-to-one odds before they attack. When they attack you without such odds, on open ground, with high ground or an escape route near at hand, you know that you are being herded into an ambush."

Achilea's face flamed. "Are you such a great captain, then? I have done my share of raiding, Cimmerian!"

"Aye, but you are accustomed to being the raider, not the defender. I have captained a score of armies, and I have served as guard on twoscore caravans. I have been a reaver and a pirate as well, so I know the habits of these scavengers."

"Then tell us, Conan," Jeyba said, "why these scum struck us at all. You yourself said that they would avoid an alert and well-armed party bearing no obvious wealth. They knew they must lose many and gain little, yet they attacked. How came this about?"

"Aye!" Achilea said, clearly relieved to have attention distracted from her tactical blunder. "They rode straight for the camels! Yet the beasts bear no panniers that might contain treasure."

The question vexed Conan as well, but he was too irritated at the woman to take her part.

"Is it not obvious?" said Monandas.

"Not at all," replied Achilea, her eyes fierce beneath lowering brows.

"Are these not splendid beasts?" Yolante asked, stroking the white neck of her own mount. "And

are these not wonderful hangings?" Idly, she plucked the severed hand from the curtain and tossed it to the ground, then stroked the fine silk.

"Who would have such animals and such traveling tents save wealthy folk? No doubt they thought us to be persons of substance—the family of a local chieftain, or perhaps members of a priestly order. Are these brigands not in the habit of kidnapping such persons and holding diem for ransom?"

Conan nodded his black mane. "Aye, they do that."

"Then it is explained," Yolanthe said. "Let us proceed." She looked at Achilea. "I still favor you as captain of our guard. No doubt you will be more wary henceforth." Sister aid brother drew back into their tents and closed the curtains.

Achilea sat upon her saddle pad, scarlet-faced and quivering with rage. Conan could see that she had been deeply wounded in her warrior pride. Yolanthe's mild words had been as a lash across her back.

At this moment, the Hyrkanians returned, yipping in tri-triumph, waving the scalps of the slain bandits, still dripping blood,

"Aiee!" Kye-Dee cried as they reined in. "That was more enjoyable than riding after hares!"

"Why did you not return when I bade you?" Achilea shouted. "For aught we knew, both attacks might have been ruses, intended to draw us away from those we are pledged to protect!"

Conan hid his amusement at this face-saving bluster. Kye-Dee was not intimidated.

"Did you call us back? We did not hear you. When we saw the backs of our enemies, we lost interest in all else. It was a gift from the Everlasting Sky, and it is a great error to spurn divine gifts. We Hyrkanians have a saying; 'There is no fairer sight beneath the Everlasting Sky than—' "

"I have heard it!" Achilea barked. She wheeled her horse and rode off, closely followed by her women and her dwarf.

"Aiee!" Kye-Dee said, chuckling. "Someone has slipped a burr between the warrior woman's saddle and her bottom!"

"Best keep your distance from her for a while," Conan advised. "Sooner or later, we'll encounter another fight and she'll have a chance to redeem herself. Let her toll a few rogues, then her good humor will be restored."

Leaving the dead bandits behind them, they proceeded on their way south. Already, the wolves and buzzards were gathering for the feast.

The district through which they rode was not rich in towns. The few villages were little more than cattle markets where beasts were bought and sold on the hoof, or else were hauled away in great wagons in the form of beef, hides and tallow. The stench of these places proved sufficient to cause the travelers to avoid them. Conan and the rest of the guards were by no means finicky, but the twins found the odor and the swarming flies unendurable.

On the other hand, progress was swifter here because they did not have to hunt. Since so many cattle were slaughtered for hides, a whole steer carcass could be purchased for a copper or two, and they feasted mightily every evening on fresh beef.

"Best to fatten ourselves while we may," Conan said one evening as they sat around their fire, tearing at the savory flesh with their teeth and tossing the stripped bones into the flame, "In the deserts south of here, we'll have no such plentiful fare."

"Truly, you Cimmerians are a gloomy lot," Achilea said. She still nursed a grudge in his presence. "Why worry about what tomorrow brings? We may not live out the night"

"Aye," said Kye-Dee. "Life is a chancy and mutable thing."

"I was once as thoughtless as you," Conan said, "but when I became a captain and a leader of men, I was forced to take thought of consequences and to make careful preparations. This is fat, easy land despite the bandits. The desert will be different. When we near the border, or perhaps in Khauran, I will have to make inquiries about conditions to the south."

"What do you mean?" Achilea asked suspiciously, disliking the way the Cimmerian was once again taking charge.

"The desert seems unchanging, but it is not," Conan went on. "Water holes will dry up overnight for no reason any man understands. New tribes will move into an area that has been uninhabited for centuries. Just keeping alive in the desert can be a difficult thing. Any surprise can be fatal. We may be forced to take steps distasteful to us."

"Such as?" Kye-Dee asked, biting into a smoking joint

"If recent years have been exceptionally dry, we may have to trade off the horses and ride camels."

"Never!" Achilea cried, springing to her feet. Automatically, her followers did the same, their hands going to their bits. "I ride no stinking, lurching, ugly camel!" In disgust at the very thought, she hurled her half-gnawed beef rib into the outer darkness. Immediately, scavengers began to fight over it.

"Surely we will not be so desperate, Conan!" said Kye-Dee, less angry but clearly shocked, "Camels are the beasts of merchants and contemptible villagers, not the mounts of honorable men of arms who ride free beneath the Everlasting Sky!"

"We may not have much choice," Conan pronounced. "Horses cannot live in places where water sources are too far apart, and we cannot carry enough water with us to satisfy a horse. It may be all we can do to carry enough for ourselves. A camel can go for days without drinking. It can live on forage so poor that a horse would starve to death eating it. If we must cross deep sand, a horse's hooves will sink in and it will founder. Camels have broad foot-pads to distribute their weight.

"And the tribes of the desert are not so picky about their mounts. They ride and fight from camels."

Achilea snorted, resuming her seat. "Who can fight effectively from such a lumbering beast?"

"You know only the two-humped, high-desert and mountain camels of your homeland," Conan pointed out. "The one-humped camels of the southern desert are smaller and much swifter, although I'll warrant they are no prettier. And a man mounted on one sits a yard higher than a horseman. It can be a great advantage in a sword-fight."

"Camels," Achilea said with a shudder of distaste. "I hope that I am never brought so low!"

At least, Conan noted, she was giving him no more argument. "If it's that or walk," he said, "you'll ride a camel." Kye-Dee carved strips of roasted meat with his curved dagger. "Our employers"—he jerked his head toward their tents—"I took them some meat, but they refused it as they always do, saying that they would eat from their own supplies, I ask you: What sort of people refuse good, fresh meat, preferring wretched dry fare?"

"The world is full of odd sects," Conan said, shrugging. "Many of them require that their followers eat only certain things, deeming all other fare unlawful. Some will eat no flesh, others will eat naught else. I have encountered wild holy men who live on insects and honey. Some will eat animals only if the beasts have been killed in a prescribed fashion. It is all a great foolishness as far as I am concerned, but I have never made it my business to tell others what gods they should worship or what commandments they should follow."

"That is the best course," Kye-Dee said. "People you cannot kill, you should leave alone."

After the others had rolled into their blankets, Conan assumed the first watch. He brooded upon the fire, his eyes seeing demon-shapes within the writhing flames. Despite his words, he was troubled. His employers, the twins, had many enigmatic qualities. Not least among them was the fact that he had never seen them eat or drink.

More perplexing was the question of the raiders. The twins' speculation that they had been the target of kidnappers who merely wanted hostages for ransom was plausible, but somehow Conan was not convinced. The men had shown spirit and determination beyond what he expected of such scavengers. They had planned well, and pressed their attack even after taking severe casualties. Ordinarily, they should have broken off action as soon as one or two were killed. Their actions had been those of men who expected great rewards.

The twins had said that they expected assaults from others who also searched for the fabulous city

of Janagar, Yet they seemed reluctant to attribute the attack to their rivals, and why was that? The Cimmerian did not like it when vexing, perplexing questions intruded upon an otherwise routine mission.

One thing was certain: He would have to watch the enigmatic pair more closely than ever.

At last they came to a sizable town. It was called Zardas, and it was located at the crossing of two roads just north of the border between Koth and Khauran, on a small river. It, too, was a large cattle market, but the town had wisely situated its stockyards and pens two miles downstream from the city. Thus the environs were kept reasonably healthy and no more noisome than the average settlement of human beings. Just without the walls were corrals for the animals of travelers, and here a number of small caravans were encamped. An official in charge of the campsite spoke with the twins and assigned them a pen for their horses and the two camels. He accepted their pen, grazing and watering fees and directed them to the town's best inn.

A few caravaneers approached to admire the two white camels. Some of them had never seen the shaggy, two-humped breed of northern camel, and never had they seen any so fine. Monandas turned down several generous offers to buy the beasts, pleading that he and his sister would be heartbroken and desolate to part with their beloved mounts. When all was secure, they walked through the gates and into the town proper.

It proved to be a colorful place; most of the buildings were made of brick or local stone, bright with paint and striped cloth awnings. The streets were lined with the stalls of small merchants, some of them local, others itinerant.

"My sister and I go to the inn," said Monandas. "**Who will go with us?"

Conan glanced at the angle of the sun. There are two hours of daylight yet," he said. "I think I will have a look around. I have never visited this place in all my travels. I'll rejoin you this evening." The other guards decided to sample whatever delights the town had to offer before repairing to the inn as well, so that the twins walked off alone.

"Is this wise?" said Kye-Dee when they were gone. "We undertook to protect them, and they are as open to attack here as out upon the plain."

Achilea shrugged her heavy shoulders. "We promised to guard them on the march. Nothing was said about towns."

"Aye," said Conan. "And after that business at the northern border, I am not convinced that they require much protection at all."

And so they meandered aimlessly through narrow streets. Conan and the Hyrkanians attracted little notice in the town, where wandering bravos of every sort were a common sight. Achilea and her followers were a different story. Nothing quite like them had ever before been seen in the district. People gaped at the savage, painted women and their beautiful giantess of a queen and her squat, sardonic dwarf. As a result, they were constantly being engaged in conversation by the curious, while the Cimmerian wandered farther and farther away from them.

In time, the Hyrkanians found a booth devoted to a gambling game common to their homeland and for which they had a passionate fondness. Conan left them behind there and went on alone. He came to a small bazaar where weapons and armor were on display. As always, his interest was drawn by the toots of his profession. They were entering the part of the world where the favored defenses were shirts of supple mail, light, well-forged helmets and small, round shields. The broiling sun of the southern lands forbade the heavier armor of the north and west. In consequence, the weapons were lighter gracefully curved swords, slender lances, and vicious little axes with whiplash hafts of springy rhinoceros horn.

At a stall managed by a blind Shemite, he found a curious weapon. It was crafted entirely from steel, with a slim shaft terminating in a head wrought in the semblance of a human fist clutching a dagger. The blade of the dagger was slightly downcurved and was actually a thick spike rather than a true blade. Clearly, it was intended to pierce mail.

"An interesting weapon, is it not?" The speaker was a man in Turanian garb, his jacket of gray silk decorated with fine gold threads. His trousers of black silk were tucked into the tops of boots made of

soft red leather.

"Too specialized," Conan said. "It can pierce mail, but if it goes through a helmet or plate armor, the point may become wedged"

The man stroked his small chin-beard. "Few men have the strength to drive such a weapon through plate."

"I can do it," Conan said, tossing the spike-mace back on the table. "I prefer a weapon with a variety of uses."

"Such as this northern brand you bear?" the man asked, eyeing the sword that hung at the Cimmerian's side.

"Aye. It is heavy enough to cleave armor and keen enough to slice flesh. Its balance and point make it a decent thrusting weapon, and the pommel is good for bashing skulls when the quarters are close."

The man smiled, displaying feral, pointed teeth. "You sound like a man who knows weapons. I've not seen you here before. Are you a recent arrival?"

"I rode in but an hour ago," Conan affirmed "Alone?"

"Why do you ask?" Instantly, the Cimmerian was suspicious. The questioner was armed with sword and dagger, but in this part of the world, every grown man went armed. He had the look of a fighting-man and Conan feared no man, but he was wary of the stranger's interest

"I have a small merchant caravan under my authority and am looking for competent guardsmen." He touched his breast and inclined his head slightly. "I am Vladig, from Akit, in Turan."

"I am Conan of Cimmeria, and as it happens, I am already employed guarding a party bound for the southern desert."

"Ah, that is unfortunate. You appear to be a prime prospect. The southern desert, you say? May I inquire which district?"

"North of me great bend of the Styx, between Zamboula and Kutcherne, south of Khauran."

"The Dead Man's Journey! That is a forbidding place, my friend. I would caution you to take another route to wherever it is you are going."

Conan was about to say that the district was not the route but the destination, but then decided that it would be telling this stranger too much. Instead, he shrugged.

"It is not my decision. I was hired to ride guard, nothing more."

"Ah, the vagaries of owners can be difficult to live with," the man said commiseratingly. He gestured to an open doorway nearby. "Would you care to take some wine with me? I have recently skirted that district and may be able to inform you of some hazards best avoided."

Conan was amenable to this. He was always ready to drink another man's wine if that man was not an enemy, and he dearly wanted to know about recent conditions to the south,

Minutes later, they were seated inside the little tavern, at a table beneath a window through which the sun of late afternoon shone in colored stripes through the awning outside. At the stranger's order, a serving woman brought them a pitcher of wine and a pair of cups. Pitcher and cups were of blue-glazed pottery, a specialty of the district.

The two men pledged each other's good health. The wine was tart, flavored with local spices and a tawny gold in color,

"Does your caravan go forth to sell, or to buy, or both?" Vladig asked.

"It shall be as the owners decide," Conan said. "We travel light."

"Ah," Vladig said, nodding. "When a caravan travels without goods to trade, it means that it goes slaving. A few-score yards of chain and shackles packs down nicely in saddlebags. Yes, the Dead Man's Journey is the shortest way between here and the black lands of Punt and Zembabwei. Of course, you must choose a better way back. Not a single captive would survive that route traveling on his own feet."

"Are the water holes low?" Conan asked.

"Even lower than usual, you mean? Aye, the oasis of Amun, once open to all, is now so diminished

that the Omri tribesmen guard it solely for their own use, driving away all other tribesmen and demanding a steep toll of passing caravans- Of a score of watering places along the Great Desert route between Turan and Stygia, less than twelve are now reliable."

"What of the Lesser Passage from Zamboula to the bend of the Styx?" the Cimmerian inquired.

"Better as far as water goes, but the predatory tribes are greedier than ever. It is the same all over. To be safe from raiders, you must travel in strong bands, heavily guarded. But such caravans require that much more water and forage. All in all, the longer route, skirting the periphery of the desert, is safer. The passage may take twice as long and you pay taxes to many local chiefs, but your chances of making it through alive are better."

"Perhaps you are right," Conan said, keeping his thoughts to himself. "I shall speak to my employers about this."

"That would be wise," said Vladig.

They finished the pitcher of wine, talking of the vagaries of desert life. Then they parted, Conan wondered at the man's helpfulness. It was not uncommon for travelers to exchange such information, but the man had shown little interest in Conan's origins, or in his travels or the lands they had crossed to reach Zardas, and that seemed passing strange.

Vladig made his way through the narrow alleys of Zardas as the light dimmed overhead. At last he came to a high, blank wall and took a key from his belt pouch, with which he unlocked a heavy gate. He passed through the gate into a courtyard where fragrant bushes grew in planters set amid polished flagstones. Beyond the courtyard was a fine house with whitewashed walls. He ascended an exterior stairway that led to a flat roof. After the fashion of the finer houses of the district, *the* roof supported a garden, and in its midst was a small penthouse. He passed beneath an arbor covered with climbing vines and knocked upon the door of the penthouse.

"Enter." The voice was deep and mellifluous. Vladig opened the door and went in. He bowed with fingertips spread upon his breast.

"I have done as you wished, my master."

The man thus addressed sat behind a table spread with tomes and curious instruments. Before him lay a heap of tiny crystals, some rounded, some elongated, others like needles. He was a tall man, lean and saturnine of feature, with a pointed, graying beard and long mustaches. He wore a robe of deep purple and a close-fitting turban of the same hue.

"Report, then," said the man in the purple robe, revealing small, pointed teeth. His hands rested upon the table before him, their fingers seeming unnaturally long. From time to time, the fingers flexed as if of their own volition, tracing intricate patterns with their tips.

"I spoke with one of their guards, a hulking great northerner with black hair. I also had a look at me party before I approached the man. It is an odd a lot as I have ever seen: Hyrkanian bowmen, a dwarf, the Northerner, even some armed women."

"Women?" said the seated man.

"Aye, four of them. Three are savage, half-animal creatures led by a big, strapping, yellow-haired wench who looks as dangerous as any bandit I ever ran across."

The other stared broodingly into the pile of crystals, which began to glow a lambent violet. "The twins have a flair for attracting oddities." His fingers began to move in more intricate patterns, and the crystals started to shift.

Vladig did not like to look at his master's hands. In repose, the fingers possessed the proper number of joints, but in motion, they were more like jointless tentacles. Also, when they moved, there seemed to be more than ten of them, although 10 swiftly did they writhe that they were impossible to count.

"The guard confirms your belief that they are headed into the deep desert. He claims that he knows not their business there, but I do not believe him. He claims to be a simple guardsman, but he has the manner of a leader of men. His simplicity is a pose. In consequence, I dared not pry too closely. He was

suspicious enough as it was."

"Did you mislead him?"

"It was not necessary. The truth was sufficient. Like any experienced desert traveler, he wanted to know about water and grass and raiding tribes. I exaggerated somewhat the danger of raiders on the Lesser Passage, but so small is their caravan that the danger is great enough. In truth, then- choices are few. If they wish to go to the place you believe, they must take the most direct route. It is the last leg of the journey that will probably be their death."

"Some creatures do not die so easily," said the other. "Give me your conversation in detail." As Vladig reported, his master, whose name was Arsaces, brooded over his crystals. They shifted according to his gestures, gathering together in one place, extending into tendrils in another, always glowing brighter. In time, they raised into the vague semblance of man-form, the violet light pulsing as if to the beating of a crystalline heart

"This Northerner," Arsaces said when Vladig was finished. "What sort of savage is he?"

"He says he is a man of Cimmeria, although I never before met one of that breed. The land is somewhere north of Aquilonia, I believe."

"So it is. The folk there are known to be among the fiercest in the world, although few of them ever leave their homeland."

"Like most Northerners, he is clearly a swordsman, and he wears a long brand at his belt. He has the bearing of a warrior and the gaze of an eagle."

"A formidable man. But then, the world is full of brawny warriors with admit swords and loud boasts. Such things are vain and foolish. Only great sorcery has lasting value."

"As you say, my master," Vladig intoned.

"Very well. What you have said pleases me. Tell me when they make ready to leave mis town and we shall follow."

"If you will indulge me. Master, why should we not leave ahead of them? They must journey hence by the southern route. We can find a favorable place for an ambush and await them there. Their defenses are negligible and they will fall into our hands like ripe fruit."

The eyes of Arsaces glared at his henchman from within deep, dark sockets. "I said we shall follow, I shall decide when it is time to attack, and you are not to assume that their defenses are negligible. I have just told you that the swords of warriors are trifling things."

Vladig fumed, but he bowed once more. "As my master commands." Once again he bowed, then withdrew from the room.

Alone, Arsaces continued to manipulate his crystalline ho-munculus, causing it to walk about the table, imitate the movements of a warrior fighting, then those of a woman dancing. Tiring of this exercise, the wizard rippled his fingertips in a final flutter and the assembled crystals collapsed into a disorganized heap. Their violet glow faded and died.

The wizard brooded, running his fingers idly through the mass of crystals. At length he swept it from the table, into a coffer of ivory-decorated wood with a bronze lid.

When he located the inn, the Cimmerian went inside and joined the others. Over a meal of spicy lamb, bread and local fruits, he reported his conversation with the man who called himself Vladig.

"Do you think his information is to be trusted?" Yolante asked. The twins sat with the rest, but as usual, they ate nothing and their cups sat untouched before them.

"There is nothing unreasonable in what he said." Conan answered, "but I will confer with other caravan masters ere we leave this place. What strikes me as odd is that he asked so little of me. Ordinarily, if you drink another man's wine, you answer his questions, not the other way about."

"Aye, I do not like that," Achilea said.

"It seems to me," Kye-Dee said, "that if this fellow had ill intentions, he would have pumped Conan for information. Perhaps he is a holy man under a vow to be helpful to strangers."

"No," said Conan, "he is a fighting-man, I am sure of it."

"This is much bother over nothing," Kye-Dee said. He rolled a morsel of lamb in a piece of bread, dipped it in a bowl of sauce and popped it into his mouth. Around the mouthful, he said, "Tell me what he looks like and I will go kill him. Then we need not bother ourselves further."

"Nay," said Monandas, chuckling. "Our difficulties are not so simply solved. Conan, did it seem to you that this man spoke on his own behalf?"

"This is a question I considered even as we conversed. He seemed forthright, but there was something about his manner that suggested he was someone else's dog. Since he only gave helpful information about the routes ahead of us, I suspect that he has orders to herd us whither his master desires."

"That is shrewd," Yolanthé said, but whether she meant the man's perfidy or Conan's assessment of it was unclear.

"Then we must not proceed as he wishes," Achilea said.

Conan shook his head. "Our choices are few. The desert presents us with a bare handful of usable routes. Even traveling those, survival is a difficult and chancy thing. Off them, we have no chance at all."

"I do not like being so restricted," Achilea grumbled.

"Yet we go to the desert," Monandas said mildly, "not to the steppe or the hill country you know so well. In the desert, we must abide by the desert's rules. But this is not necessarily to our disadvantage, for so must these others."

"Who are these others?" Kye-Dee inquired.

"There are always those who would snap up undefended prey," Yolanthé told him. "Doubtless these make it their business to find out who is going where and to lay their traps accordingly."

"No worry then," Kye-Dee said, taking a long swig from his wine cup. "Our arrows, and the blades of our companions, will keep you safe." Kye-Dee and his friends were not of a reflective nature. As long as food and wine were plentiful, they had little thought for the morrow and considered all forms of apprehension to be unmanly. Danger was the constant reality of life.

Five

Khauran was behind them. They had passed through the small kingdom almost unnoticed. As their journey continued ever southward, the land became drier. There were fewer cloudy days, and the rain was sparse and infrequent. They were now in land unclaimed by any kingdom, for the sparse grass and even sparser watering places would not support an army of any size, and no king could truly lay claim to land he could not occupy and garrison.

The terrain now consisted largely of low, rolling hills scarcely high enough to be dignified by such a title, cut frequently by deep ravines whose bottoms were dry through most of the year. The animals were smaller and did not run in large herds as they did farther north. Most numerous were graceful gazelle and impala, swift creatures that needed little forage or water and were adept at avoiding the large-eared desert cats that prowled at night.

Already the travelers had shed their heavy cloaks, skins and padded clothing, at least for daytime travel. At Conan's direction, they had purchased the loose, flowing, lightweight robes of the southern drylands. These afforded protection from the fierce sun while giving adequate ventilation.

"We will need our warm cloaks as we penetrate the deep desert," Conan warned, "so do not discard them."

"I thought it grew hotter the farther south you travel," Achilea said.

"So it does," said Conan. "The sun beats down, and then the stone and sand of the true desert reflects it back in your face like a great mirror, making it doubly ferocious. But for some reason, stone and sand do not hold the heat of day as do soil and grass and trees. As soon as the sun is below the horizon, the land cools quickly. By midnight, it is almost cold enough to freeze water."

"That does not seem natural," the dwarf protested. "A hot land should be hot at night as well."

Conan's lips quirked into a faint smile. "Throw away your cloak, then. But do not ask to borrow mine some frosty night upon the sands."

From time to time, the Cimmerian would leave the main body and ride far back along their trail. From a convenient rise of land, he scanned to their rear, looking for pursuers. Upon occasion he saw other caravans, and twice he saw armed tribesmen mounted upon wiry desert ponies, but these were nothing out of the ordinary and represented little threat to his small but skilled and heavily armed band. He was still troubled by the man who had questioned him. His suspicions were aroused, and the secretive twins with their strange quest did not improve matters.

On the third day of the trek into the desert, they spied a great cloud of vultures and other carrion birds hovering and circling over a spot a mile ahead of them.

"Something is dead up there," Kye-Dee noted.

"More than just a man or a camel," said Achilea, "to attract so many birds."

"Ride cautiously," Conan advised, "but I do not expect trouble. If there were any live men over there, the birds would not circle so low. See, even now some of them descend."

They rode onward at a cautious pace, and soon the wind brought them a terrible stench. Then they saw shapeless heaps upon the ground and among these heaps prowled dainty jackals and burly, brindled hyenas. The constant snarling of the beasts and the screeching of the birds made a hideous din,

Their horses shied at the sights, sounds and smells. The tall camels seemed unaffected. The party urged their mounts closer until they could see that the animals were fighting over the remains of men and camels. So mutilated and dismembered were the corpses that it was difficult to count how many humans there had been. The much bigger carcasses of the camels were still largely intact, and it was over these that the hyenas snarled and fought, while the jackals sought to snatch bits of man-flesh from each other's mouths. The grotesque vultures flapped in and tore loose what shreds they could, squawking indignantly when the greater creatures drove them off.

"What massacre took place here?" Achilea wondered, holding a fold of her robe across her nostrils to dull the stench.

"A caravan?" asked Yolanthé, thrusting her head from within her enclosure. She seemed curious, not at all repelled by the horrific spectacle.

Conan dismounted and walked among the corpses and the scattered limbs. The burdens carried by the camels had been torn open and scattered about. These he examined as well.

"I think not," he reported at length. He pointed to several sections of bloodied cloth and jointed poles. "They were traveling with some good-sized tents. Caravaneers take only small ones, to save on cargo space. I think this was a nomadic tribe on the move. See, mere were women and children among them." He indicated some of the scattered remains, although only a practiced eye could discern such distinctions as age and sex, so thoroughly mutilated were they,

"I saw no sign of a band this large as we fared hither," said Achilea. The stench may have repelled her, but the horrific sights left her unmoved.

"I think these must have been coming up from the south when they were attacked," Conan said. "I estimate mere must have been at least a hundred folk of all ages slain here."

"We could collect the heads and make a count," Kye-Dee suggested, sounding bored. Dead people did not interest him, especially since someone else had already looted them of all valuables.

"No need," said Monandas. "Who, think you, did this deed, Cimmerian?"

"I see no arrows," Conan answered. "Sometimes a tribe may be identified by its style of fletching. In fact—" he bent over a corpse that still possessed its head and upper limbs —I see no wounds save those made by the teeth of these scavengers. That means little. Such destruction as these carcasses have suffered could well obliterate all sign of wounds," He was far from satisfied with this explanation, but he felt that it would do for the others.

"We've no reason to stay here longer," Achilea said, her face contorted with disgust. "Let's be away."

"The rest of you ride on," Conan said, "I want to investi-gate the land around here and see if I can find out who did this killing and whither they went from here. If they are ahead of us, best to know it now."

"Very well," Yolante concurred, "but rejoin us before nightfall without fail."

The Cimmerian merely grunted assent and nodded, not taking his eyes from the ghastly carnage littering the desert floor. The others rode off to the south. For a while, he walked among the corpses, ignoring the snarls of the hyenas. The creatures were powerful enough to drag down a full-grown bull, but they entirely lacked combative spirit. Only prey that was weak, helpless or already dead attracted them.

Satisfied that he would learn no more from the dead, the Cimmerian remounted and began to ride around the slaughter site, looking for signs of the killers. Employing an ancient hunter's technique, he walked his horse slowly in an ever-widening spiral. Once he stopped and dismounted. The ground roundabout was hard, but here he saw marks that looked out of place. He squatted and studied them.

They were faint, mere parallel lines in the dust. There were two sets of them, as if a clawed creature had crouched there, then launched itself at its victim, leaving the scratch-marks behind. Frowning, the Cimmerian looked nearby and saw no others from the same creature. Whatever it had been, it sprang by the use of only two clawed feet. He brushed the dust away from one such mark and his scalp prickled. The marks, though faint, were etched into the stone below the dust. He knew that no natural beast had claws hard enough to make such impressions.

Crouched low as he walked, the Cimmerian searched the area and found another score of identical marks. When he had found them all, he realized that they formed a slightly staggered line. From the tapering depth of the scratches, he knew that the creatures had been facing south when they sprang. For many days, the wind had come from the south. The things had set their ambush so that the wind would carry their scent away from the approaching nomads.

The entire scene, as he reconstructed it in his mind's eye, left him profoundly uneasy. He had known wolves, and sometimes the big cats, to hunt often in packs or in small hunting teams, but never to lay so premeditated an ambush. What manner of creatures were these?

The victims had not been newcomers to the desert as was his own party, nor even desert-wise caravaneers. These had been nomads who passed their whole lives among the sands and stone and scorching sun of this wilderness. Yet they had been caught completely by surprise. Perhaps the uncanny creatures were unknown even to the desert nomads.

Before leaving the scene, Conan went back over the line of marks. He found one that was clearer than the others. It was in a slight depression, shaded by a jagged stone topped by a scrubby bush. This mark had been protected from the wind. In the direct sunlight he lowered himself to his belly and sniffed. Faintly, but distinctly, there came to his nostrils a pungent, unpleasant odor. It was as sharp as vinegar, but it was a smell he did not associate with living creatures. It put him in mind of the workshops where craftsmen etched designs into the blades of swords and daggers with acid. He knew of no creature that had such a smell.

Remounted, he rode on southward, his eyes alert for signs of the things that had wiped out the tribe of desert people. What had been their motive? Food? The scavengers had been *ML* the bodies so long that it was difficult to tell. And why had the creatures made off with the tribe's belongings? Human scavengers might have looted the corpses, but if so, they had carefully obliterated all sign of their presence. Conan was willing to allow that this might have happened. He accounted himself a master tracker, but he had been among people who, within their own territory, could hide every sign of their movement with a skill that was all but supernatural.

He did not ride straight for his companions. Rather, he zigzagged, covering much more ground than necessary. He did so that he might spy any further sign of the marauders, or any other threat to the group. The desert was devoid of farther traces. He reached the party at sunset. Even before he saw them, the southerly breeze wafted to him the scent of grilling meat. When he arrived, he found that the Hyrkanians had bagged a fine gazelle. His stomach rumbled, for he had had no food save for a few

scraps of dry bread, and that had been early that morning. The alarm of the slaughtered tribe had driven all thought of food from his mind, but now he was famished.

He rode to the fire and dismounted, drawing his dirk even as his boot struck the ground. He crossed to the low-burning coals where the animal's disjointed carcass sizzled.

"Did you find anything?*" Kye-Dee asked as the Cimmerian cut slices of gazelle from a well-roasted haunch.

"Little that made any sense. Just now I have better use for my mouth than talk." When he had satisfied his hunger with the savory meat and handfuls of dried dates from a leather bag, washing down with water from a skin, he told them of the strange marks and their even stranger attendant odor,

"Like acid, you say?" Monandas commented, his face more somber than usual.

"Aye. I have smelled something the like in the shops of the blade-etchers, and where jewelers test the purity of gold. But never have I known any natural creature to have such a smell."

"What of unnatural beasts?" asked one of the Hyrkanians, his fingers twisted nervously in his long, black plaits.

"I want nothing to do with any such," Conan said firmly.

"Scholars learned in the natural arts," Yolante said, "affirm that the tiniest creatures are made quite differently from the greater ones. Four centuries ago, Uhnas of Kordava wrote a monumental treatise on the six-legged creatures, in which he states that many of them employ acid as a weapon, or to prepare materials for their nests, or to soften their food to an edible state. Even the common ants have a strong acid within their bodies."

"Ants do not grow so large," Conan said. "Nor do they go about on two legs."

"Much as I esteem learned discourse," Achilea grumbled, "I think you are reading too much into some scratches on the ground and a bit of smell. That tribe was probably attacked by enemies, and the killers wiped out their own traces. What was left was obliterated by the hyenas and the other scavengers. There is no mystery. We must take special care to watch for them, that is all." Her stubborn tone suggested that she was trying to convince herself. "So we must," Monandas said.

As they continued south, the rocky, eroded soil, scrubby brush and cactus began to give way to sandier terrain, then to true dunes that marched away in the distant horizon like the waves of the sea. The horses began to hang their heads and grow sullen, not liking the change.

"At first opportunity," Conan announced, "we must trade the horses for camels. There is an oasis not far from here where several caravan paths meet. There we will find cara-vaneers looking to trade their beasts for horses for the trek north."

"I do not like the idea," Achilea said. "And I do not like camels! They are ugly, smelly creatures without grace or beauty."

"Not fit for a queen, you mean?*" said Kye-Dee, giving forth one of his high-pitched laughs. "I do not like them, either, but I fear the Northerner is right. The horses will not last much longer, and even a camel is better than going afoot." The other Hyrkanians made sounds of vigorous assent.

"This we will do," Monandas said. "Our destination lies yet farther south and we must have mounts."

"Camels!" said the dwarf, spitting into the fire.

The next day, they crossed a range of low hills and saw a few scant acres of greenery lying in a small valley, protected from the winds. To reach the oasis, they had to ride through a gap in the hills, and across this gap were ranged a half-dozen men on camels, arrows fitted to the strings of their short bows. They were lean and fierce-looking, wearing spired helmets wrapped with black turbans. From the turbans hung veils dyed with multicolored stripes and reaching to their stirrups.

"We can easily brush these aside," said Kye-Dee, idly thrumming the string of his great bow. "Our weapons have twice the range."

"Aye," Achilea affirmed. "I'm in a mood for some target practice. I've shot at nothing but hares and gazelles for many a day."

"Nay," Conan said. "These are Omri tribesmen by their colors, and if there are six of them here, there are a hundred more at the oasis. The man I spoke to back in the village said that the Omri have staked out this oasis as their own and levy a toll upon passer-by. We will pay because we must."

"I will deal with them," said Monandas,

They rode forward with weapons handy, but without any show of truculence. While Monandas conferred with the leader of the pass guards, the Cimmerian and his companions eyed the tribesmen and were eyed in turn. The desert men showed the deep contempt that all nomad tribesmen held for strangers. They were aided in this by the advantage in height their camels gave them. They were so swathed in their striped robes that nothing of them showed save their hands and their fierce, black eyes. Their boots were of soft blue leather, and their swords had long, straight blades.

"Paying for water!" Achilea said sullenly. "It is as bad as being in a town."

"Nay," said Conan, "for these fellows charge only for access to their water and grass. Townsmen would levy a tax on goods passing through and would want a percentage from our Livestock exchange."

"Townsmen!" the dwarf snorted. "No wonder they are such natural prey for real men."

"These are not," Conan cautioned. "They are predators just like us. *Do* not provoke them. I wish to ask them about conditions to the south, and about that exterminated tribe we found."

Monandas handed over the toll demanded by the guards and they descended into the valley, fighting at their reins to keep the horses, maddened by the smell of fresh water, from breaking into a run. The tall camels kept to their more dignified pace.

When the horses had drunk enough, the riders tugged them away from the water lest they founder. Conan gave orders that the beasts be carefully curried and otherwise well tended. He wanted them looking their best for the trade. That settled, he went to find the Omri chief. An inspection revealed that three caravans camped at the oasis. One of them carried a number of spare camels, and he made a mental note to speak with the master of that one before nightfall.

The Omri was encamped closest to the spring-fed water hole, allowing others to bring their beasts to the water to drink, but reserving the shade of the palm trees for themselves. Conan estimated that there were about eighty fighting men present, with no women or children. With detachments of a half-dozen guarding each of the approaches, that made his original guess of a hundred men reasonably accurate. He knew that the lack of resources made larger bands impractical, save for occasional small armies put together to raid the towns of the desert periphery.

He found the chief lounging beneath a black tent of woven goat's hair. The Omri took his ease upon a rude couch made of camel saddles and blankets. From time to time, the man sniffed the smoke of herbs burning in a tiny brazier that rested by his side. As the Cimmerian approached, the desert chief's keen eyes took in his brawny frame and arrogant walk.

"Welcome to the water and grass of my tribe, stranger," the chief said. He gestured to a broad platter of hammered brass that lay before him. Upon it rested some scraps of bread sprinkled with grains of coarse salt. "Break your fast with me."

Conan sat cross-legged upon the ground and took one of the bread scraps. "You are generous, O Chieftain," he said before thrusting the dry morsel into his mouth. In the desert, accepting bread and salt was a symbolic act, placing him under the chief's protection by the ancient laws of hospitality. Now any act of treachery toward him would be punished inexorably by the gods.

For a while, the two spoke of minor things: the condition of the desert to the south, the likelihood of a favorable exchange of horses for camels. Then Conan broached what was really on his mind: the exterminated tribe they had discovered. The chief was roused to consternation, his eyes wide with alarm as the Cimmerian described what he had found.

"Set and Iblis!" the chief cried, making a gesture to ward off evil. "Was there anything left of the robes or other trappings of these people?"

"I found some scraps of black cloth with thin, white zigzag lines embroidered on them."

The chief looked marginally less disturbed. "That means those folk were Beni Nuer. They are a

worthless people who scavenge at the desert's edge, too cowardly to brave the great sands of the inner fastness, so they are no loss, but I do not like these signs and marks you found!"

"What do they mean?" Conan asked.

"You have eaten my bread and salt, so I am bound to warn you: The Beni Nuer were slain by the *hadizza*, the demons of the whirlwind! They are unclean things from the deepest desert. Not since my grandsire's time have they come out to the desert's edge, but in the last turning of the moon, I have heard of three such attacks."

"What brings them hither?" Conan asked.

The man shrugged. "They are things of spirit and the netherworld, so who can say?"

"Know you what they look like or how they slay?"**

"They leave none alive to describe them, but their victims, both human and beast, are rent asunder. The hearts are eaten, and often the brains, but the rest is wanton savagery."

It was clear that the man knew little of the things save for old tales, but it was valuable to learn that there had been other such attacks and that all had occurred within the last moon. Conan thought to try something else.

"Know you of an ancient lost city called Janagar, said to lie in the deepest desert?"

The chieftain laughed. "My friend, the desert is full of lost cities. I myself have seen half a hundred. Some yet rear their ruined towers against the stars, others are buried so deep in the sands that the colossal images of their great men can only peer over the sand that covers them to their noses. It is the folly of men that causes them to build cities. Always, the gods of the desert reclaim their own. Wisdom lies only in knowing the ways of the desert. If you wish, you may ask Asoq, the Teller of Tales. He knows more old stories than any other of our tribe, and he may have heard of this Janagar."

Conan thanked the chief courteously and left to look for the Teller of Tales. He was satisfied that his party was now safe, for the rules of desert hospitality were more powerful than any civilized laws. This did not mean that the chief was henceforth his lifelong companion. The protection extended only while they were at the oasis. As soon as they rode away, [they became legitimate prey once more as far as the Omri were concerned.

A few questions led him to a small pen of heaped stones where a single tribesman watched over the camels of the Omri. He was an elder by the standards of the desert nomads, among whom few lived to see advanced years. His eyes were still bright, albeit buried in a mass of wrinkles. He was spared the more rigorous patrolling and guard duties carried out by the younger warriors, but a fine sword hung at his side and he looked as ready as any to use it.

Conan saluted the old man and held out a hoarded flask of date wine. "Your chief tells me that you are a font of knowledge, deeply learned in the tales of the desert."

The elder's mouth was hidden by his veil, but his eyes crinkled even more with a smile. "Aye, that I am, stranger." He accepted the flask, then turned his face modestly aside as he lifted his veil to drink. He replaced the veil and handed the flask back to Conan. "I thank you. What tales would you have, stranger? I know all the stories of Rustum the Magnificent I know the tales of kings and rogues, and of the loves of men and of gods. I can tell of battle and death, and of the wooing of princesses, and of the curses of mighty wizards. What would you hear?" The old man's voice was deep and mellifluous, the voice of a born storyteller.

Conan took a drink and handed the wine back. "I would hear of a lost city of the deepest desert."

The old man drank as before, and returned the flask. "Ah, there are many! The City of Brass appears to mortals once every hundred years, and of those who enter to read the marvelous verses writ in gold upon her marble walls, one in three dies, one in three goes mad, and the remaining third are blessed with perfect fortune for the rest of their days.

"Ilkhar of the Pearly Towers lies a shattered ruin, for the people sinned greatly and the gods rained fire upon her for the space of three days and nights, sparing neither man nor beast. And the wizards of Amanopet raised her into the skies—palaces, houses, temples and walls—and she was never seen by

man again.

"Of which lost city would you hear, O stranger?" He reached for the wine and Conan passed it across.

"Know you of a city called Janagar of the Opal Gates?"

The old man's eyes narrowed as he searched his crowded memory. "By Iblis, stranger, but you ask for the oldest and most mysterious of tales!"

"Then you have heard of it?" Conan urged.

"I have, but so long ago and from so rare a source that I may well be the last tale-teller living who knows of Janagar. Even in earliest youth, I sought out the old tales from the ancients who whiled away the long desert nights with the stories and songs of the desert tribes.

"When I was a small lad, my father's clan lay encamped outside the walls of Zamboula, where we attended the camel-trading fair once each year. We shared our water site with a tiny tribe called the Wadim. These had once been a mighty people, but envious tribes had banded together to take their water holes and their secret pastures, and in the space of five generations, they dwindled to the small remnant I saw outside Zamboula. They were a melancholy people, for they had gained the name of an accursed tribe, wherefore the young men could not get wives and they were doomed to extinction." The old man sighed and took another swallow of the wine.

"Please continue," Conan prodded, making no gesture to take back the flask.

"A moon later, on the trail to Kassali in Punt, we learned that the Wadim had been wiped out by the Stygians, who were building a fort at the last water hole held by that unfortunate tribe. Now all their tales were lost, save for those I heard that time outside Zamboula."

"And one of these tales was of Janagar?"

"Aye. Give me leave to remember, stranger, for it has been many, many years." The old man sipped at the wine and stared at nothing for a few minutes. Then he resumed.

"It returns to me now: In a time so long ago that the folk who are now the tribes of the desert were mere farmers and grubbers in the earth—" he turned aside slightly, lifting his veil and spat upon the ground to show his contempt for settled people, even if these were his own ancestors "—Janagar the Wicked shone like a jewel in the fertile land that is now the very heart of the inner desert.

"Mighty was Janagar, a place of lofty towers and vast tern-pies from which ascended the fragrant smoke of incense burned before the altars of the gods. Wealthy was Janagar beyond the dreams of wealth, where the palaces of the princes shone with gold and silver, where the folk wore silk and velvet, and the very harlots were adorned with jewels that a queen of this age would envy." The old man's gestures were as eloquent as his tongue, his hands and his long, thin fingers sketching in the air the towers and the people of the long-dead city.

"But evil came upon splendid Janagar, foul wizardry contrived by the later kings and their effeminate courtiers. Wealth and power were not enough for them. No, they craved immortality, and they wrought the blackest of sorcery, practiced the direst of rites, to secure it unto themselves. The steps of the temples ran red with the blood of victims sacrificed amid ceremonies so foul as to blast the very senses of any who looked upon them,

"This angered the gods. Not the bloodshed, for the gods delight in blood. Nay, it was the overweening ambition of those evil sorcerers of Janagar. They sought to surpass the very gods." The old man leaned forward and spoke in a hushed voice, as if fearing the unwanted attention of higher powers. "For know, O stranger, that even the gods are not truly immortal, but all must die in time. And for this reason, they laid Janagar under a curse. In one hideous night, all the inhabitants who could fled from the city, never to return.

"But there were some who did not flee. Those terrible wizards and their minions remained, seeking until the last instant to rum aside the fierce wrath of the gods. In that night, they performed their ghastliest rites, cast spells of a power never before attempted by the most demented of mages. The very land around Janagar withered from the concentrated evil of the battle between mortals and gods, and during

that night, the desert had its beginning, and it spreads to this day, with the site of accursed Janagar at its very heart."

Thus far, it seemed to Conan that the tale was much like many others. Lost cities often carried a story of inhabitants who angered the gods, of ancient evil and lingering curses. Was Janagar no different?

"Know you," the Cimmerian asked, "of a legend linking Janagar with the *hadizza*, the whirlwind-demons?"

The elder's eyes clouded with thought. "Nay, the tale I heard so long ago made no mention of it. Yet the *hadizza* occur in many stories, and it may be that they had their origin in the unholy fall of Janagar. For if the desert itself began there, might not the demons of the desert likewise have found their genesis?"

"Aye, that is so," Conan agreed. He rose and thanked the old man, who sought to tempt him to stay and hear more tales of the desert, but the Cimmerian had other business.

As he had expected, there were caravan masters eager to trade camels for good horses, and he spent much of the day in examining the desert beasts. The traders who hoped to gull the ignorant Northerner by praising the merits of inferior animals were sorely disappointed, for Conan was well versed in the ways of both camels and traders, hi the end, the exchange was made. The Hyrkanians, Achilea and her followers were appalled and disgusted to see what they were expected to ride.

"These are the ugliest creatures I have ever seen!" Achilea cried, horror writ upon her face.

"They smell even worse than they look, by Set!" said the dwarf,

"You don't look for beauty in a camel," Conan said, exasperated. "You look for strength, and endurance, and heart. These creatures will never inspire a poet to create verses for them, but they are sturdy and free of sickness. They will get us where we need to go, and even better, they'll bring us back again."

"They do have such comely eyes," Yolante pointed out "Large and liquid-brown. And their eyelashes are long and gracefully curled."

One of the camels gurgled and spat copiously, narrowly missing Achilea.

"They are ill-mannered," said the former queen.

I am going to show you how to saddle them," Conan said, "and then you are to practice riding mem."

Grousing and complaining, the others chose their mounts and went through the saddling process while their beasts regarded them win thinly veiled contempt. The Cimmerian showed them how to make the camels kneel for mounting, Caravaneers and Omri warriors gathered to watch this rare entertainment. Soon ail were roaring with mirth.

"Don't dig in your heels!" Conan shouted. "These are not horses and they don't understand what you mean when you try to spur them! Use your stick!" Each saddle came equipped with a riding crop—a thin, whippy stick about a yard in length.

After an hour's practice, Conan was satisfied that his charges had mastered the bare rudiments of camel-handling, It would be some time before they were any match for the desert raiders, but at least they would be able to keep mounted for the next leg of the journey. The Hyrkanians even managed some enthusiasm for the camels' superior height, which would afford their bows extra range.

"Very well," Conan said grimly as the sun touched the western horizon. "I think you can all be trusted not to break your necks now. Tomorrow we ride south."

"I am sick of this desert," Achilea grumbled.

Conan laughed. "Think you so? You are in for a surprise, woman."

"What do you mean by that, rogue?" she asked hotly.

"I mean that what we have ridden through ere now was not desert. It was just arid ground."

Even the haughty queen's self-assurance slipped at this revelation. "Truly? If what we have ridden through was not desert, what is me true desert like?"

"You'll recognize it when you see it," he promised. "It is like hell with the fires burned out."

Six

Jet and Iblis!" cried Jeyba the dwarf. "Where are we?"

The little band stood in line atop a dune, and before them stretched an expanse of sand that rolled and undulated like the waters of a sea. Overhead, the sun-washed sky resembled a great dome and was unmarred by a single cloud. The heat of the sun beat down upon them like the anger of a terrible god.

"This is the desert," Conan told them.

"How do we find our way?" Achilea asked. "There are DO trees, no hills, not so much as a tall stone to serve as a landmark."

"It is possible for one wise in the ways of the desert to stay to a course," the Cimmerian said. "The question is, do we know where we are going?" He turned to the twins, who sat their camels, no longer within their traveling tents for a change. "You are the ones who know where this mysterious place lies. Can you find it?"

"Of a certainty," said Monandas. "We will lead you straight to our destination."

"That is not enough," Conan said "I have never traveled to this part of the Empty Lands. From here south, I do not know where the water holes lie. If there are oases, the desert tribesmen keep them a secret. The camels can go for many days without drinking, but even they must have water eventually. We carry enough water in skins to keep ourselves alive for perhaps ten days, but no more."

Yolanthe smiled. "Have no fear. Our supplies will be more than adequate. We will stop here now and rest beneath what shade we can contrive. When the sun is low, we go on."

"That would be wisest," Conan said. "Night is the best time to travel in the desert, although I've little faith in this quest of yours. I hired on to guard you from marauders, not to die of thirst in the wilderness of sand."

"Aye, and that goes for us as well," Achilea said, her gesture taking in her three women and her dwarf.

"If we have not found your lost city in five days," Conan went on, "then we must turn back. Even then, we'll be damned thirsty when we get to an oasis, and perhaps short a camel *or* two."

"That should be adequate time," said Monandas.

Conan showed them how to make the camels kneel, to scoop depressions in the sand beside the beasts and arrange their blankets over their saddles and bedrolls, using their riding crops as poles, so that they had crude, makeshift tents with which to shield themselves from the sun during the hottest part of the day. They lay gasping beneath these for hours, until the sun drew near the western horizon and the air grew marginally cooler. With that blessed diminution of the heat, they rose and continued their journey.

The sun dipped below the horizon and for brief minutes, the sky glowed a fierce crimson. Then the darkness came quickly. One minute, a few bright stars became visible. A few minutes after that, there were hundreds. Minutes later, hundreds of thousands blazed forth in crystalline splendor. Two hours after sunset, the gibbous moon rose and the desert became almost as visible as during the day, lacking only the color lent by sunlight.

Beneath the great arch of stars, they moved in near silence, for the foot-pads of the camels made no such noise as the hard hooves of horses. In the desert fashion, all their metal harness was muffled to avoid clinking, and the only sounds made were the faint moans and grumbles of the camels.

As was his custom, Conan rode well ahead of the others, his every sense alert for attack. He had the uneasy sense that the greatest danger might not be from human enemies. What were these whirlwind-demons like? Could they be fought? Would steel be effective against creatures whose talons were hard enough to gouge scratches in stone? As he pondered these unsettling questions, Achilea rode up to his side.

"How do you know where to ride?" she asked. She spoke quietly, for in the desert night, a whisper could be heard at a distance of a half-score paces.

Conan gestured toward the southwest. "Monandas said to take a bearing on the Lesser Dragon."

The constellation of nine stars glowed just above the horizon. In its center, the Demon Star shone like a ruby.

"In my country, we call that one the Winged Demon," she said with a slight shudder. "That red star is the most ill-omened in all the heavens." It seemed to Conan that for the first time she spoke as if she feared something.

"Then it is a fitting guide," he said, "for I think it leads us to no good destination."

"How so?"

Conan told her what he had heard from the Omri tale-teller.

"What does it mean? The old man heard tales as a youth. The mad twins read things in old books. Does it mean anything at all? Surely this city, if it truly exists, is so old that its evil is long vanished. As for the treasure they hope to find, I do not believe in it. Dust and broken stone is all they will find."

"If that is the worst of it, I shall not grieve," Conan said.

"And after that our task will be done. What will you do then?"

"The wars are mostly at an end in the north. But there are vast lands to the south. There is always something there for a warrior of spirit. If you are skillful with weapons, you will find a ready market for your skill."

"What are those lands like?" she asked. The Cimmerian was surprised to hear her speak with anything less than hostility.

He pointed to the southwest once more. "If we keep to this course and do not die of thirst in the meanwhile, we will come to the Styx, the river some call Nilus. It is the greatest river in the world, and beyond it lies Stygia. I do not care for that land, for though it is rich, it is steeped in sorcery and it is ruled by tyrants who have far too many laws for my liking."

His arm swung to point due south. "That way lie Punt, Keshan and Zembabwei. They are niggard lands of mountain and jungle and high savanna. The wild game cannot be described, it must be seen—herds so vast that the eye tires in taking them all in. There are giant elephant and giraffe and tiny antelope, and creatures of all sizes in between. Zebras like horses striped black and white graze beside buffalo with horns two paces from tip to tip, and next to them, rhinoceros like armored siege-engines, with nose-horns as long as a man's arm. And the great cats prey upon all of them, lion and leopard and cheetahs as swift as a diving hawk."

She was enthralled by the description. "I would see such sights! I had thought that beyond the steppes lay only the lands of the settled people, fit for nothing but prey. Are the people of these lands fierce?"

"Aye, they are that. They are all dark folk, but they vary greatly in look and language. I have seen pygmies no more than three feet tall and tribes where the shortest man stands higher than seven feet."

"How do they fight?" she asked with professional interest

"The spear is the favored weapon of those lands. Some use the bow with poisoned arrows. In Keshan, many fight on horseback, but few of the people farther south are riders, for in the jungle lands, there are many diseases that kill horses."

"There are lands even beyond those you named?"

"Aye, and no man I ever heard of has gone so far south that he has run out of land. The Black Kingdoms are vast."

She pointed west. "What lies that way?"

"The Styx takes a great bend and flows west to the sea. South of it lies Stygia. To the north of it, the first nation beyond this desert is Shem, and to the north of Shem lies Koth. They are pastoral lands where men raise cattle and sheep in huge herds. They are also great archers. West of Koth is Argos, and then Zingara. All these lands border upon the Western Ocean."

"Have you visited these places? I never knew that the world was so vast."

"I've spent time in most of them," he affirmed. "Aye, there is no end to the world. Back that way,"

he jerked a thumb over his right shoulder, "lie Iranistan and Vendhya and Khitai. Men say that Khitai is as large as all the western lands put together, but how they would know that is beyond me."

"Back in the steppes of my homeland," she said wistfully, "I spoke to carvaneers who had traveled all the way to Khitai. They said that it is indeed vast, but it sounded too orderly and boring for my taste."

Conan laughed. "I doubt it not. Well, there are plenty of disorderly places for the likes of us. I've not yet even spoken of Ophir and Aquilonia and Nemedia, all of them rich and civilized and warlike, nor of the Pictish Wilderness, as savage as the Black Kingdoms. North of them are Asgard and Vanaheim and Hyperborea, and my homeland of Cimmeria. These are not rich lands, but they produce warriors beyond compare. And beyond the Western Ocean, I've no doubt there are other lands and peoples and kingdoms squabbling among themselves and ripe for raiding. Perhaps I'll see even those before I die."

"You have the heart of a true adventurer," she said, and he thought he detected a trace of admiration in her voice.

"I think you are like me," he said. "Afraid of little, loyal to your word and your friends, in love with danger and ever ready to ride beyond the next hill to see what lies there."

"Of course," she said. "I am a queen."

"And only one whose word is as bonds of iron would stick by these mad twins. But I have taken their pay and I will see this thing through to the end. I'll own, though, that I have seldom undertaken anything so foolhardy."

This time, it was she who laughed. "I doubt that, Conan. I think that you take on many foolish tasks for the sheer joy of it. I have done the same, riding after treasure that never existed, pursuing vengeance long after anyone of good sense would have quit, Fighting on when the odds against me were so great that I had no chance of victory. What other sort of life is worth living? It may be short, but it is a life full of fire and spirit."

"Aye, that is so. I'd live no other way."

They rode on for a while, saying nothing. The Cimmerian felt that, somehow, a bond had been forged between them. He was about to build upon this, perhaps to suggest greater intimacy with something less than his usual forthright fashion, when she straightened and focused her full attention straight ahead. He did likewise, cursing internally. What a rime for an interruption!

"Something comes," she said quietly, her blade whispering from its sheath.

Conan's sword was already in his hand, not even making a whisper as it slid forth. His nostrils flared. "The wind is from thai direction, but I do not smell that demon-scent."

"Praise the gods for that," she muttered. "Men are trouble enough without demons interfering. How many, think you?"

He strained his ears and heard only a shuffling sound, accompanied by a low, droning hum. "Unless I miss my guess, it is a lone man or woman, and not being very careful. It could be a decoy, something to hold our attention and lull us into complacency, allowing his confederates to attack us unawares."

"I am no villager!" she said, nettled. "I know that well enough."

He shrugged. So much for their newfound intimacy. Now he could see someone walking toward them. The stride, dejected and shuffling *as* it was, was that of a man. As the figure drew nearer, the humming noise resolved itself into a low, dirgelike song. The stranger definitely was not happy. He seemed not to notice them until he was no more than a score of paces before them. Then he looked up and gasped.

"Ahhh! Who are—mercy, my masters, it is wily I, Amram, the most unfortunate of men. I mean you no harm."

Achilea laughed shortly. "Truly, 'twas not you that concerned us, fellow. Are you alone?"

"Oh, assuredly! And you?"

Conan ignored the return query. "Then you must be a great fool, for only one such would walk alone upon these sands, and that makes me suspicious, for this desert is often called •the Fool-Slayer."

"But I did not begin thus," said Amram with head hung low, "Mine, sir and madam, is a sad tale."

"I doubt that not," said Achilea, "for a hangdog rogue like you could tell no other."

"Keep an eye upon him here," Conan said. "I shall ride ahead and sniff out any ambush. If you hear sounds of fighting, slay him and ride back to the others."

"Very well," she said. "You know the desert better than I." Conan rode out a half mile, zigzagging and cutting wide crescents, covering every possible ambush spot. He had known desert men to lie beneath blankets or straw mats and cover themselves with sand, where they would wait patiently for hours until their prey approached. When their victims were literally atop them, they would rise from the sand like demons exploding from the underworld, shrieking horrifically and laying about them with their blades until all their prey lay dead in a welter of blood and the booty was theirs. But there were signs by which eyes as keen as his could detect such lurkers, and the signs were missing.

Satisfied that no ambush lay in store for them, Conan rode back to where Achilea waited. The stranger stood apprehensively by the warrior's camel. He was a small man, slight of build. His lowered cowl revealed a narrow, beak-nosed face that creased into an ingratiating smile when he saw the Amazon, seeing the Cimmerian returning, sheathed her sword.

Conan and Achilea resumed their interrupted trek. "Walk along between us, fellow," Conan ordered. The man complied. "Now tell us your story."

"Know, then, that I am a merchant of Baruba, in Keshan—"

"Your accents are those of Koth," Conan said.

"Ah, just so. My father was a great merchant whose fine estate lay in the idyllic hills of Ramat, near—"

"Not only is your speech that of Koth," Conan interrupted, "it is that of Khorshemish!"

"As I was about to say, my father's great trading house lay in the fabulous temple district of that city—"

"Not only is your speech that of Khorshemish," Conan went on relentlessly, "but it is that of the Swamp, a warren of seedy dives and houses of ill fame by the river."

Amram gritted his teeth, but he went on gamely. "I can see that you are a widely traveled man. Well, my father was not so great a merchant. He had a money-lending shop, but it was the very best such establishment in that humble district—" He broke off and squawked in alarm as Conan leaned from his saddle and encircled his neck with one powerful hand. His fingers did not squeeze, however, but only felt the strangely roughened skin just above the collarbone.

"If you are the son of a respectable pawnbroker," the Cimmerian said, "why do you bear the scar of a Stygian slave-collar upon your neck?"

"We have not yet come a hundred paces," Achilea said with wonder, "and this strange wight has already descended in rank from merchant prince to slave. How much lower can he go?"

Conan's fingers tightened. "Even lower than a slave is a corpse. Would you care to try that role, Amram?"

"Mercy, Master!" Amram cried. "You do misapprehend! Long ago. I served in the army of Koth when we were at war with Stygia. I was captured and I abode in that land for some time in a state of reluctant servitude, but it was no more than the fate that often befalls soldiers. Surely you can find no dishonor in that."

"So how came you to strolling about in this wilderness, you serpent-tongued rogue?" Achilea demanded.

"I was just coming to that, great chieftainess! You should not be so impatient! The savor of a tale lies in its leisurely unfolding, not in its hurried and ill-considered pouring forth, like water from a great aqueduct."

"Strange," Conan mused, "the sort of people one meets in the desert in the middle of the night."

"Years ago, I escaped from Stygian captivity and made my way to Keshan. There I prospered as a

trader and in time, became master of my own caravan. My camels were the best, and each year I trekked the route from Baruba to Punt, thence to Kutchemes and Zamboula, and then back again."

"And what did you trade?" Conan inquired.

"All the usual goods: ivory, feathers, furs, pearls that come from the western shore through Kush and Darfar, slaves and so forth. On the return journey, I often carried spices, eastern silks, which are superior to the silk of Stygia, wrought gems, slaves of different race, and these I usually traded 'in Stygia for goods of that land and fine Shemitish glassware before returning home to Baruba, where I have several wives and some dozen or so children."

"The goods you mentioned are heavily taxed in Stygia, especially the silk," Conan observed. "Did you evade the customs agents in this?"

Amram shrugged, "I see no good reason to cause the authorities more trouble than necessary. I am adept at avoiding them."

"Then you are a smuggler!" Achilea said.

"What self-respecting caravaneer is not?" Amram asked with honest wonder in his voice.

Conan laughed "Aye, that's true enough! All right, you've told us the vaunting part of your tale and I think we can believe some small parts of it Now give us the sad part."

Amram sighed dramatically. "The times grew hard for the caravan trade. In the south, many camels died of a new affliction. To the north, old water holes dried up and in consequence, the desert tribes grew even more predatory. I could not assemble enough goods for a decent caravan, nor hire good, experienced men to drive such animals as I had left. And thus, alas, I came to commit folly." He gave forth a truly lugubrious sigh.

"What was the nature of this folly?" Conan asked, knowing from experience that the time had come for him to prod the tale-spinner. It was a part of the storytelling ritual of the southern lands.

"I accepted a commission from a stranger, a man who knew not the desert, a madman upon a fool's quest."

Conan felt a tingling come upon his scalp, and he looked at Achilea, to find her looking back at him. "What was the nature of this quest?"

"I was in Kutchernes, down to eight camels, one of them in suspect health. My men had deserted to find more promising employment. Then this one came to me. He said that his name was Firagi and that he wished to hire a caravan to take him into the deepest desert. All the other masters he approached refused to listen to him, but I was in no position to turn him away. I was desperate."

"Describe him," Conan said shortly. "A tall, lean fellow, very well dressed. His look was that of no nation I have ever seen, and his accent was very strange. I would speculate that he was some sort of Iranistani. He had something of the aspect of the scholar, but by this I do not mean a student of no experience in the real world. He was arrogant and truculent, like certain unpleasant priests of Stygia"

"I know that sort you mean," Conan assured him. "Go on." "He said that he would pay for the hire of men and the purchase of supplies. I agreed, but the only men I could find willing to hazard so uncertain a mission were the utter dregs of the caravan trade, which, as you may know, constitute a very low sort of man indeed."

"I am aware of that," said Conan. "What did he expect to find in the deep desert?" Achilea asked.

"At first, he was closemouthed about this. But as the days advanced and we found naught but barren, boundless sand my men balked. Then he told us of a marvelous city lost for ages in the very center of the desert, a city filled with treasure." Amram shrugged. "I have seen many strange sights in my travels, so why not? More important, this aroused the cupidity of my men and tempted them to go on, although it was clearly dangerous to continue. Then one of them disappeared."

"Deserted?" Conan asked.

Amram shook his head. "Nay. One morning we awoke and the man was gone. I took stock of our goods and found that nothing was missing. What sort of fool would leave a caravan in the midst of the desert without taking a camel, or some food or at least a skin of water? But all was accounted for. The

night had been windy, and there were no tracks to tell -hither he had gone. We decided that he had fallen mad and wandered off into the desert to die. It happens sometimes. "We trekked on. The next morning, another man was gone.

The circumstances were the same. Now my remaining men grew fearfully alarmed. A curse lay upon us, said one. A demon of the sands tempted the men into the desert, said another. These demons are known to take the form of a beautiful woman to lure men to their doom. Some sing an irresistible song, which is heard only by their chosen victim. He can think of nothing but finding the source of that song, and forgets all else in his pursuit of it."

"And then?" Conan prodded,

"Be not so impatient, Conan," Achilea chided. "The night is long and this fellow is amusing. Allow him to recite his epic in his own fashion."

"You are lucky, Amram," Conan said. "This woman is rarely so tolerant of men's peculiarities."

She laughed, and Amram grinned nervously, clearly relieved that his captors were in a good mood. "The lady is both wise and beautiful. To continue: My men were distraught with fear and they accused our employer of being in league with the demons, of luring us into the great waste to be slain and devoured by the things. He said it was but a fluke, that two men had simply gone mad one after the other. Again he spoke of this great city, which must be near. He pleaded that we should go on for just one more day. I was for turning back, but the others were men without great powers of discernment, and they agreed."

"And the next morning, another man was gone," Conan said, not making it a question.

"Nay. The next day, we awoke to find our water skins slashed. All that was left were stains upon the sands. When we were over our first, despairing horror, we turned in anger upon Firagi. This time, he stood there with a smirk upon his arrogant face. He told us that now we must find the city, for within it lay springs that never failed, and only he could take us there."

"I would have slain him for his impertinence and made my way back, water or no water," Achilea said.

"Ah, but that is only because you are new to the desert, lovely and fierce lady. We, experienced men all, knew that it would be our death to retrace our steps without adequate water. None of us had been so deep into the trackless waste before. Indeed, we had never met anyone, however experienced, who had dared enter that district. The fool's city might be nothing but mere vaporings of his deranged mind, but it was our only hope. Lacking any viable choice, we followed him yet farther into the sands."

As they rode, Conan listened to the man's tale, but he did not allow it to distract him from his primary mission, which was to guard the caravan from raiders, be they human or other. The faint breeze brought him little save the rustlings of their own harness and the breathing of the camels. Likewise, he smelled only the beasts he and Achilea rode, for this district did not support even scraggly desert brush or thorny cactus to add their scent to the parched air.

"After three days of this terrible journey," Amram went on, "we were nigh insane with thirst. So we killed one of our camels to slake our thirst with its blood. With the wood of its saddle for fuel, we cooked some of its flesh and drew some strength therefrom. This heartened us, but after that, its fellows regarded us with suspicion.

"Soon even the camels were staggering and weaving, but Firagi strode on as if he did not notice small things like heat and thirst and the boundless miles. His was the intensity of the fanatic. It would have been pleasing to slay him, but then we would only die, so I swallowed the temptation to commit murder and forged on.

"One by one, camels and men dropped, and we who survived went a little farther on the strength of camel flesh and blood. But let me tell you, my friends, that while blood may keep life in your body, it does little to allay thirst, for it is as salt as the waters of the sea.

"In the end, only I and Firagi were left, and all the camels were dead. An hour came when I knew I could go no farther.

As I plodded along behind Firagi, I resolved to kill him before I expired, in order to avenge myself and my companions, for although they had been the veriest scum of the caravan trade, still, they had been my comrades of the desert trail. I chose a promising spot upon Firagi's back and drew my dagger." At this Amram drew a knife from the sheath tucked beneath his sash and flourished its blade, curved like the tusk of a boar, with dramatic panache.

"A deed of far greater profit had you done it earlier," said Conan.

"Be still, Cimmerian!" Achilea snapped, clearly enthralled with the tale.

"But even before my blade touched his back, Firagi gave forth a loud cry," Amram went on. "He stood at the very crest of a dune, weaving forward and back in his weakness, I could not see what had so affected him, so I resheathed my weapon in order to look, resolving to finish him off upon the next dune. I stepped around him to see what had caused his outcry, hoping for a small spring. The tiniest, swampiest oasis would have gladdened my heart more than the richest city of treasure." He broke off for another dramatic pause.

"Tell us!" Achilea commanded.

"It was not a spring. It was, indeed, a city."

"Is it true, men?" Conan said, reluctant to trust the word of the shabby caravan master.

"Aye, it is true. At least it was a city. I cannot say as to the veracity of the treasure, as you shall soon learn. And it was no heap of ruins as are so many ancient cities of the drylands, its towers toppled and its statues neck-deep in the sands. Nay, this was a city utterly intact to the last tile, as much a city as Khorshemish, where I was born, or Luxur in Stygia, where I was a slave.

"See it as I saw it, my masters: Behind the massive walls, the towers rose a hundred paces against the blue sky; some of alabaster as white as salt, some of purple or green or red marble, crowned with bronze cupolas, and atop each, a spire terminating in a globe or a star or a crescent moon, gilded and flashing in the sunlight. So slender were those towers that they should have toppled in the great desert storms that come once or twice in each generation, powerful enough to destroy any structure of mud-brick or fired-brick, sparing only low buildings of stout stone. Yet the hard-blown sands of the desert had not even etched the fine polish of the delicate marble! Is this not a great wonder?"

"If it is true, it is indeed a great wonder," Conan said "Go on!" Achilea said eagerly.

"Below the towers were the shapes of palaces, each topped with a brazen dome, some low and broad like the spreading fronds of a palm tree, some high and swelling like the turban of a sultan, and as rich with flashing gems. There were flat-topped terraces that may have been elevated gardens such as one often sees in the great cities of Stygia, but I saw not a trace of greenery upon them, nor anywhere around the city. "At once, my desire to murder Firagi abated, for he had led me truly, if at some cost. He cried out, his voice like that of a camel's from exceeding dryness: 'It is she! Truly, this is Janagar of the Opal Gates!' And this was the first time he spoke the name of the city, a name that was unknown to me until that moment, and I consider myself well-versed in the lore of the desert."

Conan and Achilea exchanged a look. "Your stock with us has just gone up a notch," said the Cimmerian, with less doubt in his voice than previously. "Tell us more."

Amram nodded and grinned. "Ah, you are connoisseurs of a fine story. Good, good! Never have I told one so strange that is also true. Well, then. We stumbled down the face of the dune toward the city, and now, over my great shock at seeing the apparition, I saw that there were other strange things about the place. It lay in the middle of a vast depression of sand as smooth as the inside of a bowl. The depression was not terribly deep, but deep enough to hide the city from view until one reached the crest of the last dune. And no birds soared overhead, such as one sees even in the most barren parts of the desert, for the long-winged birds will fly from far away to espy carcasses or small prey in the sands. But the sky above Janagar was as devoid of life as the city itself.

"For devoid of life it was. No scent of smoke drifted over the walls, as no wisp of it ascended from the houses and temples. Most uncanny of all, no slightest sound came from the great city. Even in the sleepest hour of an ordinary city, one will hear *some* sound, if just the snore of a sleeping sentry or the

stumbling of a drunk. Outside a city, there is always the sound and smell of livestock, but there was no such outside Janagar.

"And then, just as I began to believe that it had to be a dream or a mirage, I did hear a sound! And it was the most welcome sound I could have imagined!"

"Human voices?" Achilea asked.

"Nay, it was water! I heard the sound of water splashing into a pool! This lent wings to my sore feet and I fairly flew the last few-score paces to the city wall. There, just without the great gate, was a fine watering-trough such as many cities provide to give drink to camels and horses just arrived. It was ten paces long and two paces broad, and it brimmed with pure, clear water! At one end of the trough there stood a pedestal, upon which was carved the face of a fanciful beast, and water gushed in abundance from its fanged beak. I fell to my knees and plunged my face into the blessed liquid and did not come up until I had to breathe,

"Then I saw that Firagi, the fool, had walked right past the water as if he did not see it. Instead, he stood gaping at the splendid gate, and its carvings were indeed bright with inset opals. 'Come drink!' I cried, 'You must perish else!' But he heard me not, or else he ignored me. Instead, he crossed his arms upon his breast—" here Amram pantomimed the gesture, lowering his head somewhat "—and he spoke words.

Much aghast was I when the gates before him began to creak and groan!

"These valves, which stood fully ten paces high, were made of some dark, massy wood and were strapped with heavy bronze and studded with the same metal. Both metal and wood were carved with many intricate and fanciful designs, but at that moment I had no eyes for their beauty, for before my eyes, they began to move! Slowly and with great majesty, the ponderous doors swung outward, until they stood wide enough to admit a man walking. Without a further word, Firagi passed within.

"I was dazed, but only for a few moments. Then I scrambled to my feet and began to walk toward this mystical city that was the destination of all our suffering. But even as I approached, the gates began to swing shut. I ran toward them, but already the passage was too narrow to admit me. I grasped their edges, but my efforts were futile, for they merely slid from my grasp and shut with less noise than the door of an ordinary house. I called out to Firagi, but he heard me not, nor, I suspect, did he care.

"All that day, I sought entry into the city. I made a complete circuit of the wall and found other, lesser gates, but all of them were firmly shut. The wall was too smooth to climb, and I had neither grapple nor rope." He fetched forth another deep sigh.

"At last, I walked away. I knew that I would not get in, and there was no point in dying of hunger, although i had water in abundance. I fully expected to die in the desert, but had the good fortune to fall in with you distinguished travelers."

"You came up from the south," Conan said. "Why did you walk north when you left?"

"I knew full well that I had no chance going back the way we had come. I knew that the desert was a bit less forbidding to the north and decided that I had some slightly better chance by setting my steps in that direction."

"You seem to me a man who takes his opportunities when he sees them," said Achilea. "Have you a few of those opals to show us?"

Amram grinned. "Had I been able, I would have stuffed my purse with them. But their inlay began some five or six paces up the wall. The builders of that marvelous city were not so foolish as to set the precious stones down where they could be easily reached."

"You have had a long trek and great adventures," Conan said. "But you do not sound like a thirsty man. You did not even ask us for a drink."

Amram reached within his outer robe and drew forth a small water skin. It was almost flat, but when he shook it, a little liquid could be heard to slosh in the bottom. "I had the slashed skins patched and we brought some of them with us," he explained. "For I knew that should we find water, we would need to bear some of it away with us, if we would live, I bore away all I could carry from the fountain

before the gateway of Janagar I was down to the bottom of this little belt-flask when I happened upon you. That was why I was singing a song of sadness, for I knew that I would probably die within a day or two."

"Then this city lies not far from here?" Achilea asked.

"Only three days, for folk mounted upon camels. And, since we speak now of the useful beasts, would you happen to have a spare mount among your train, that I might ride with you? I have traveled afoot for far too long."

"We are part of a small caravan," Conan said. "And although we are not the leaders, I think that our employers will allow you to ride one of our pack beasts if your story pleases them. I cannot say whether it will. This you must determine for yourself."

"Ah, surely they must take pity upon a poor wanderer, bereft of his goods and lost upon me vast bosom of the desert!"

"They are a strange pair," Conan said. "Go back along our tracks and you will come upon the rest. Find the two riding the very tall, foreign camels and tell them what you have told us. They may not be happy to hear about this Firagi, but I doubt they will hold it against you."

Amram bowed deeply, "May the gods of the desert watch over you and keep you from harm." With that, he turned and walked away.

When the man was gone, Conan said, "No god of this place cares aught for man or his works."

"What did you think of Amram and his story, Conan?" Achilea asked.

"I think it is very odd that we should chance upon him in this vast waste in the darkness."

"Aye, and did you notice that he never asked why we were here or what we seek in the wilderness? Of course, he seems half mad and that could account for it"

"It could," Conan agreed, "And I think it is not the last strangeness we will encounter on this fool's journey."

Seven

The twins seemed almost jubilant. Amram's story had pleased them well, and now the odd little man rode a camel just ahead of the others, guiding them toward his miraculous city. A short distance behind him rode the others: Achilea and her followers, Conan, Kye-Dee and the Hyrkanians. Theirs was a mixture of elation and confused foreboding. At least they were not chasing around aimlessly in the desert, but the sheer strangeness of Amram's story cast a pall over them.

"Why are the twins so happy?" grumbled Jeyba the dwarf. "They seem relieved. Yet they said they knew where this city was. Why do they need a guide?" With the back of a wide, stubby-fingered hand, he wiped sweat from his brow. Provided with a guide to lead them quickly to their destination, the twins had decided to risk a daytime march.

"At a guess," Conan said, "I would hazard that they knew the approximate area where it was to be found, but not its exact location."

"And," Achilea added, "they knew of it only from ancient texts and tales. This man's account seems to affirm that it truly exists, and is truly as untouched as they had heard."

Conan patted his camel's neck and it released a restrained grunt. "The beasts are weakening and must have water soon, but they will hold out for a day or two yet. If there is anything to the fellow's story."

"And if there is not?" Achilea asked.

"Then, like him, we shall learn how long we can last on camels' blood. After that, we shall almost surely perish, for we have chased this dream so far into the desert that we can neither turn around and go back nor continue through to the other side. From what Amram said, the desert to the south is even more barren than that through which we have come."

Achilea spat in disgust. "I never dreamed that any land could be so utterly without life or beauty or anything else that makes it worth seeing or crossing."

"Aye," said Kye-Dee sadly. "We have seen nothing worth shooting at save lizards for days. What good is a land without targets?"

Conan had more on his mind than the lack of wild game. Fresh meat was fine, but he could live a long time without it. He turned to Achilea. "Ride with me to that dune," he said, pointing to a lofty heap of sand a quarter-mile to their left. "It is the highest point we have seen in days. We can survey in all directions from there."

The two rode to the top of the dune. From its crest, they could survey the flat, monotonous landscape for miles, to every point of the compass. "You do not often ask that I accompany you on a scout."

"I wished to speak with you out of hearing of the others."

"I thought as much. What troubles you?"

"First we had the twins searching for Janagar. Now we have Firagi, and I do not like it"

"When they engaged us, they said that others might be on the same trail and we might incur danger thereby."

"Aye, but does it not seem odd that people going after treasure should make so little provision for bearing it away with them? They seek a whole city of treasure, yet they bring naught save riding camels and a few pack beasts, and those must be burdened principally with water and forage for the return journey."

She frowned with concern, but voiced her objection: "Yet do they not say that the purpose of this expedition is to establish the reality of the city and its treasure, and its precise location? Surely after this, they can mount a serious expedition with hundreds of camels to bear the treasure away."

"So they say. But if we are to believe Amram, Firagi made no preparation for a return journey. It seemed of no account to him that all his men and all his camels died on the trip to the city. He had no hope of returning through the desert on his own, yet he ignored even fresh water to go within and shut the gate behind him."

"Oh, he is probably mad, as the twins are mad," she said, clearly irritated at this line of questioning. "You worry too much, Cimmerian. I would never have thought you one to fret over danger."

"I am no fool!" he said hotly. "And I'll not be played for one!"

"Then how do you read these nines, Conan?" she demanded. "There was no sense to this journey when we undertook it, and I've looked for none along the way. It seems you are not so easily satisfied."

"Indeed I am not," he replied. "As to how I read these happenings, I tell you this: Whatever these madmen seek in Janagar, it is not treasure of jewels and precious metals. It is something that needs no beast to bear it away, and I strongly suspect that it is something that we cannot share."

She scowled, fingering the hilt of her sword nervously. "Aye, you probably have the right of it," she bit out at last. "But what can we do about it at this juncture?"

"Damned little," he admitted. "We can only go on. But when we reach this fabulous city, I expect to have some answers out of our mysterious twins, and if they make those gates open. I will be right behind them when they enter, not sucking up water in a trough!"

To his surprise, she laughed. "I think few enemies catch you with your head in the water. But I fail to understand your bad mood. We undertook this commission to get out of Leng, did we not?"

"Aye," he agreed sullenly.

"And are we not out of Leng?" She gestured to the vast expanse of sand all around them,

"We are that," he agreed, unable to suppress a grin of his own. "And just now, Leng does not seem such a bad—" He broke off abruptly.

"What is it?" Her head snapped around to see where he was gazing. Far to the northeast, there was a faint glitter.

"Riders following us," he said.

"Aye, that is our back trail," she agreed. "Are you sure it is riders? This sand is full of bits of crystal

and shiny minerals."

"This is different. Steel makes a brighter flash. And you can see it move."

She studied the phenomenon for a while. "Aye, I can see it moving. And there are more than one. Armor, do you think?"

"Lance-points, more likely. It would take hardy warriors to wear armor in this heat. These care little if they are spotted, too, else they would tie rags around their points."

"Who might they be, I wonder," she mused.

"I cannot say, but I am minded of that man who was so curious about our doings at the last town."

"You think it is he?"

"I intend to find out tonight."

That evening, as they made their tireless camp, Conan reported the sighting to the twins.

"Well, we knew that others were on the same scent," Monandas said philosophically.

I plan to scout them out," Conan said. "When it is fully dark, I will go back along our trail and see who and how many they are. If I can work my way close enough, I will try to overhear them."

"I will go with you," said Achilea.

Conan preferred to undertake such missions alone, but he felt this was a poor time to dispute with her. "Very well."

"Us, too!" said all three of her women simultaneously. Their pale eyes shone like those of wolves through their bands of black paint

"Nay," Achilea said before Conan could protest. "This is a scouting mission, not *a* raid. The eyes and ears of the two of us will be sufficient. Another time, perhaps, we will want stealthy blades and nooses, but not now."

The women submitted with ill grace, but they took great care in preparing their queen for her mission. They took out their pots of paint and removed her flowing desert robes. As she sat near-naked upon a small carpet, they camouflaged her body to blend with the moonlit desert, giving her a tawny color covered with dots, splotches and streaks of black.

Conan made simpler preparations. He stripped likewise, then rolled in the fine sand to dust himself thoroughly and kill any betraying shine from his glossy skin. After that, he streaked himself with black soot mixed with grease, purchased when they outfitted themselves for desert travel—a preparation employed by the people of the desert to blacken the pits of their eyes in order to cut the glare of the sun.

In the moonlight, the two of them looked like pieces of the desert floor come to life. Their weapons were muffled with rags to make no betraying noise and, at the same time, break up their distinctive outlines. The moon was nearing full and stood halfway to zenith when the two set out, moving at an easy trot, a pace they would maintain until they drew near the object of their mission.

Their tracks from earlier in the day could have easily guided them, but Conan did not want the people following them to see his and Achilea's footprints the next day. Knowing that they had been under surveillance might put them in an undesirable state of caution. So the two sped lightly over the sand a half-mile to the east of their path, trusting to luck that the followers would not set out flankers that far from their own train.

Conan's senses were alert for the slightest signs of activity, and he did not fail to find a few. Even in the deepest desert, there is life. The blazing sun keeps all life in hiding during the day, but at night, insects, lizards and small mammals come out to search for sustenance among the sands and rocks. Serpents and other predators come out likewise, to prey upon them. The Cimmerian's eyes caught the flicker of a lizard's tail as the creature chased a beetle, and the slither of a snake side-winding its way up a dune. Once he saw a diminutive fox with huge ears questing after desert mice. There were even occasional bats and ground-nesting owls that prowled the night air on silent wings.

They were away from their camp for less than an hour when they saw the glow of a fire ahead, and they stopped to confer.

"They have pack animals to spare if they have brought along their own firewood," Achilea noted.

"It suggests that they are serious about their expedition," Conan said. "Although I'll own that bearing firewood is unusual for this deep in the desert. Ordinarily, men wish to traverse this part as swiftly as possible and do without luxuries like fire. There is precious little to cook, and warm clothing will suffice for the chill of night. Let's look closer."

They stopped again when there was only a single dune between them and the other party,

"I smell no smoke," Conan said.

"There is no wind," Achilea pointed out

"On a night like this, smoke should lie in a haze. We should smell it."

"No good talking. Let's look."

They belly-crawled the last few paces up the dune. Then they slowly raised their heads until they were peering over the barrier of sand. What they saw beyond appeared ordinary enough at first: a score of men, half of them seated around a campfire, four standing guard a hundred paces out in each direction, the rest tending to a double score of camels or else taking supplies from packs or otherwise employed upon mundane errands. But still, something seemed wrong and after a quick survey, Conan realized what it was.

"The fire!" he whispered, his voice so quiet that a long-legged desert mouse crossing the dune ten feet in front of them did not hear him. Achilea said nothing in return, but he saw her fine eyes widen as she saw what he had seen.

The flames flickered like those of any ordinary fire, but their color was strangely wrong. The usual hues of red and yellow and orange were there, but beneath them was an undertone of purple, and from them rose no smoke. There was no crackle of burning wood. They seemed to spring from a heap of something that looked like shiny stones. That they gave forth heat was evident, for over the flames was suspended a small kettle such as the desert folk used for brewing herb-tea. Likewise, thin cakes of bread baked on flat stones were propped near the fire.

"What does this mean?" asked Achilea. Even as she spoke, an owl swooped upon the mouse just below them. The owl's passage was absolutely silent, but the mouse voiced a shrill squeak in the instant before its neck was broken by the bird's beak. A few men near the fire turned to look toward the sound, and the two warriors froze into even greater stillness than before. The owl flew off with its prey, and the men returned their attention to their dinner and their tasks.

"You see that man in the red boots nearest the fire?" Conan whispered.

"Your friend from Zardas?"

"Aye, it is he. That man in the turban next to him—he seems to be the one in authority."

She studied the man. His clothing was purple: a vaunting, royal color for one riding the desert with villainous-looking companions. "So it appears," she agreed.

"We must work our way closer if we would hear anything," he said. "We will loop to the north and come in from that direction."

"It will cost us time," she protested. "We can crawl around the end of this dune, through that gully of sand and to yonder outcropping of rock without being seen."

"We could," Conan told her, "but in the morning, they might see signs of our passing. They came down from the north upon our trail and it is unlikely that they will retrace their steps in the morning. Even if someone goes out to scout their back trail, our tracks will be so mixed with theirs and our own from the day before that only a Pict trailmaster could sort them out."

"Aye, that would be the most prudent. If we must be cautious, let us be cautious all the way."

They crawled back down the slope of the dune and trotted to the north crouched low, hands on hilts to hold their weapons still.

"What mink you about that fire?" Achilea asked as they cut to the west.

"Sorcery," he said in a sour voice. "It is a wizard we have on our trail."

"It seems a good kind of magick to have when crossing the desert," she said. "Fire without fuel. If he can magick up water as well, they have had an easy crossing."

"There is no such thing as good magick," Conan insisted..

"Traffic with uncanny powers bothers you?" she asked, sounding amused. "I dislike it when it is used against me, but magick in my own favor is like any other sort of advantage."

"If you use magick," he said stolidly, "the price always proves to be greater than the advantage."

"Have it your own way," she said with a shrug, the thick muscles of her shoulders rolling beautifully in the moonlight. "*It* is nothing to me. Ah, here we are."

They had come upon a multitude of tracks left by their own camels and those of the followers. They turned to walk back south through the midst of the tracks. When they came within sight of the tethered camels, they paused. Between the ever-shifting feet of the camels, they could see winking the light of the uncanny fire. About half of the beasts knelt, their ungainly legs folded beneath them.

"We can best work our way closer through the camels," Conan said. "There is little other cover."

"Will they not be alarmed and give us away?" Achilea was still uncomfortable around the beasts. She would have had no qualms about going among horses.

"By this time, we smell like camels, too," he reassured her, "Besides, camels make noise all night. They should take no notice if we are careful. The sentry on this side patrols back and forth about a hundred paces. I will work my way close and go in when he gets near to his next turn. You come in after me on the turn after."

"And if we are discovered?"

"They are too many to fight. Pick a direction and run into the desert. We will rendezvous back at our campsite."

"Very well," she said. "Go ahead."

Stealthy as a stalking cat in high grass, the Cimmerian worked his way toward the sentry. As he drew nearer, he saw that the man was not one born to the desert. He wore long trousers and a padded jacket, not desert robes, and cradled in his arms was a crossbow. The weapon was all but unknown in these regions. He hummed as he walked, his eyes sweeping the desert beyond the firelight at intervals. This as well revealed that he was foreign to these parts. They were the habits of a soldier accustomed to walking sentry atop the walls of a keep. A desert tribesman did far less walking and more listening. In the desert night, the ears were of exceedingly more use than the eyes.

The regular beat was another sign of inexperience. On a castle wall, it was of no account, but on a perimeter vulnerable to infiltration, it was a gift to an enemy, telling him exactly which way the man would be facing, and when. Conan waited until the sentry was ten paces from his turning point, facing away from him, and he slithered on his belly into the herd of camels. A few of the beasts looked his way, but they maintained their attitude of bored indifference.

He paused and remained absolutely still. A few minutes later, Achilea crawled up beside him. This time, they did not exchange words, but began to inch their way nearer to the fire. Conan found a camel kneeling broadside to the fire and he worked his way next to it until he lay alongside, his flank pressed against the camel's ribs as he inched his head forward to look past the beast, his face beneath its lordly, high-arched neck. Somewhere near him, he knew that Achilea was doing the same. He knew that her tribe's solitary time in the wilderness had taught the young warrior-women well, for thus far, he had no criticism of her nighttime stalking craft.

He told himself to forget the woman for the nonce and concentrate upon the men before him, who had finished their meal and now sat upon carpets spread across the sand. They rested their backs against their camel saddles and sipped their pungent herb-tea. He saw that about half were desert men, probably men hired for their expertise in the desert and with camels, for they wore the regalia of at least three different tribes. The rest, like the sentry, had the look of soldiers. Some of them polished armor or cared for weapons, and he saw at least three more crossbows. They were a disparate lot, and he assumed them to be mercenaries. The crossbows were powerful and accurate weapons, but murderously slow to

reload and doubly so on camelback. The desert people favored snort, fast-shooting bows.

The rest of the men favored curved swords, long, light lances and small, round shields. As he watched, he saw a man, satisfied that his breastplate was properly polished, slip it into a cloth cover and put it away in a saddle pack. As he had guessed, these men kept their armor packed away while upon the desert. Every military detail was important. Now he studied Vladig and the man in the purple turban. Only the Cimmerian's iron self-control kept him from jumping when, abruptly, the purple-clad man clapped his hands three times, rapidly. The flames died down until there was nothing but a pulsing glow where they had been, Conan saw that the glow came from what looked like a heap of crystals laid upon a flat stone.

"We've no need for heat now," said the turbaned man. "There is no sense in using magickal essence without need."

"As you say, my Lord Arsaces," Vladig said, speaking not quite as unctuously as Amram. Even so, Conan's keen ears caught the unmistakable tones of the stooge and toady in the man's speech,

"How much longer?" asked a desert man. "Thy magickal arts have served us well. Lord Arsaces. Never have I known men of the sands to penetrate so far into the Empty Lands, but now we near the end of our range. If we would return home with every man and every camel, we must turn around soon."

"Wherefore, my friend Dauda?" said Arsaces mildly. "Have I not kept you supplied with fire, needing no wood or brush?" He gestured toward the gently pulsing glow of the crystals. "Have I not found springs for you where even the men of the desert thought there was no water?"

"You did so, my lord, and we honor you for it, but the gods of the sands are mocked at one's peril. If they should glance in our direction and take note that we have flaunted the deadly barriers they have erected to safeguard their domain, they may take a fearful vengeance."

"You exaggerate your importance in the scheme of things, Dauda," Arsaces said, a faint sneer in his voice. "The gods take no note of the doings of mere mortals, save they be great wizards, able to disturb the profound thoughts of divine beings."

"That is not the teaching of our ancestors, magician," said Dauda with a bit less respect in his voice. "We are taught to honor the laws of the gods and to avoid incurring their wrath, lest not only the individual, but the tribe, too, suffers."

"Commendable piety," Arsaces said. "Especially since it comes from raiders, thieves and unhung rogues!"

Dauda seemed to be unmoved by this calumny. "What care we for the laws of lesser men, of merchants and townsmen? It is the laws of the desert gods to which I refer, and it seems to me that we risk offending them."

"No matter," said Vladig, smoothly interposing his voice into a situation that threatened to turn ugly, "We will reach our destination in a day or two, it that not so, my lord?"

Arsaces glared at Dauda, then said. "Aye, it is so. No more than two days."

Vladig turned to the desert man. "You see? Just two more days, eh? Our camels still have fat humps, and we ourselves are far from dry. Just two more days, and then we turn back. Is that not acceptable?"

Dauda's hand, which had strayed toward his sword-hilt, slowly dropped away. "We can survive another two days, aye. But no more than that."

"Enough of this ..." Arsaces paused as the crystals before him began to flicker. They looked as if they were giving off tiny sparks and they shifted about restively. "What is this?" he mused.

"What means it, my lord?" Vladig asked.

The wizard began to mutter beneath his breath and the crystals shifted more energetically. Conan's scalp prickled as they rose and assumed a vaguely human shape, crouching and turning in the manner of a man peering around him, trying to see something obscured by distance or darkness. Then it halted and extended a crystalline "arm" toward the direction of the camel herd. Most of the desert men were upset by the uncanny thing and fingered amulets while they muttered counterspells against evil, but Dauda

looked out toward the herd.

"Khazim," he said, "go you and see if anything is among the beasts."

"A spy?" Vladig asked.

"The camels should make more noise if it were," said Dauda, "but look anyway."

The man named Khazim approached the herd, drawing his sword. Two or three others joined him, their weapons ready. One of them strode toward the camel behind which Conan lay. The Cimmerian knew that at night, men see motion first, shape second, and color not at all. The essence of not being seen at night lay in keeping perfectly still. When he set his mind to it, Conan of Cimmeria could make a stone seem like a lively object. At need, he could allow a fly to walk across the surface of his eyeball without blinking.

The man strode right by him, seeing no movement, no man-shape, taking no note of the lumpish form next to the camel. He peered about, squinting over his veil. "I see naught here. Is there anything over there, Wakir?"

"Only my ill-tempered camel. That unholy homunculus is just—*awwk!*" The man's exclamation of surprise came as he leapt back. "A sand-demon! And I trod upon it!" Something exploded from the sand at his feet, and then Wakir reeled back with his hands over his face, which had just been soundly rapped by the heavy pommel of a sword. The other men among the herd stood stupefied for a moment.

"That is no demon!" shouted Arsaces, "It is a man! Take him alive!" Vladig rushed toward the scene of excitement, and Conan cursed beneath his breath as the camel next to him lurched to its feet. Now all the camels were shifting and groaning loudly, frightened at the sudden, unexpected activity erupting in the peaceful night.

Conan got to his own feet, seeking to keep animals between himself and the questing men. He did not want to draw his blade lest it betray his location with its shine, but he kept his hand around its grip, ready for an instant draw.

"Here he is!" shouted someone. Conan heard a crunch and a gasp. Then came a ring of steel. There was no help for it now. He could make an easy escape, but Achilea needed a distraction. The men around the crystal "fire" were all on their feet by this time, most of them with their weapons clear. Conan ran straight for them, whipping his sword clear of its sheath, bellowing a Cimmerian battle cry at the top of his formidable lungs.

Men gaped openmouthed at this unwonted apparition from the depths of the desert night. But they were fierce rogues, and a man loomed before Conan, a shield raised and lance poised. The Cimmerian's blade crunched the light shield inward as if it had been made of parchment, and the sound of an arm-bone snapping was audible above the man's scream of surprise and pain. Another came in from Conan's right and he sent the man to the ground with a backhanded blow, the flat of his blade catching the man across the jaw.

Arsaces was on his feet, screaming in a tongue Conan did not know. The man made no effort to grasp a weapon, but his arms were raised, fingers crooked into the likeness of talons and clawing at the midnight air as his cries took on an ominous regularity and rhythm. Lights began to flash from his fingertips. Men were racing back from the camel herd to confront this new menace.

"It is he!" Vladig cried, "The Cimmerian!" Sword in hand, he lurched forward.

The men were coming from all sides. Deciding that Achilea, if she lived, had had all the distraction she was going to get that night, Conan knew it was time to leave. A blow of his sword and one from his fist sent two men flying and he charged through the space between them. In seconds, he was beyond the circle of men. Behind him, he heard the twang of a crossbow string, then the whisper of a bolt passing over his shoulder. So much for all their careful preparations.

From the camp came the continuing syllables of Arsaces's roaring chant. He wondered where Achilea was.

There were the sounds of footsteps chasing him for a while. Then a voice he recognized as belonging to the man named Dauda called out: "Come back! That one ran like an antelope and you'll not

catch him. Sentries! Were you asleep?"

"What of the other one?" called a voice faint with the distance.

"Escaped as well," said a disgusted voice.

"I still say it was a demon!"

"Demons do not fight with steel, fool!" said Dauda.

"The one who charged us was the man I spoke to in Zardas," said Vladig. "I'll wager the other was that sword-bearing wench."

"No woman did this to me!" cried a man with an edge of pain in his voice.

Conan chuckled as he slowed to a walk. If they had accomplished little else with their foray, at least they had sown consternation and confusion among their followers. He knew that Achilea had made her escape, but he was concerned that she might have been wounded. No one back there claimed to have landed a blow upon her, but many things can happen in the confusion of a fight, especially one that takes place in darkness.

He shook off the worry. There was no sense brooding upon that which he could not help. The sounds died away behind him. All but one. He stopped, listening and wondering what it might be. It was a keening, screeching sound, unlike anything he had ever heard, and it sent unpleasant ripples down his spine. Then he realized what it was: the chant of the wizard Arsaces, rising to a truly inhuman scale.

Suddenly, it seemed a very good idea to get back to their camp as swiftly as possible. Conan began to trot. Then he broke into a run. He knew that running at night on such treacherous terrain was most unwise. Even a man with his great strength of limb and perfect balance could fall should a stone turn under his foot. He might step into an unseen hole and shatter his ankle. He could tread upon a swift, venomous viper and pay the price for disturbing it. Most awful of all, he might run out onto the powdery quicksand that could swallow a man mounted upon a camel. Going at headlong speed, he could find himself knee-deep in it without a chance of making his way to firmer sand.

But just now he was ready to risk the lesser danger to escape the greater. For he knew that the wizard was up to some baleful magick, and it was certainly aimed at him. But if the mage did not know exactly where the Cimmerian was, he might have difficulty in directing his spell with accuracy. At least, Conan consoled himself with the thought. He had little choice. He feared no enemy who came at him with steel, but magicks were something else.

As he ran, the moonlit landscape dimmed before his eyes. This was a puzzling thing. He glanced up at the moon and his blood ran cold, for the silvery orb had turned blood-red. Even as he looked, the stars began winking out, first the dimmer ones, then the brighter. He slowed to a trot as the whole desert grew dimmer and finally he began to walk. If it was unwise to run across the desert by moonlight, it was folly itself to do so in utter darkness.

For true blackness was coming, no doubt of it. What wizard was so powerful that he could extinguish the moon and the stars? Surely, only the greatest of gods could do such a thing! Even as the thought came to him, he felt something gently sifting down upon him and he wiped a hand across his skin, where the stuff was collecting upon the sooty grease that streaked him. Mystified, he rubbed the gritty powder between thumb and fingertips. It was sand.

Now he understood, after a fashion: The wizard had raised a sandstorm, but it was a sandstorm without wind. What could this portend? One thing he knew: In the desert, sand could be as deadly as any other of its multitude of hazards, and not just quicksand. The Cimmerian continued to walk toward the camp, and as he went, he stripped some of the rags from his sword and fashioned a veil to cover his mouth and nostrils, for already he was breathing sand.

Soon he was walking slowly, putting one foot carefully before the other, his eyes slitted so that his lashes would filter out the worst of the sand. Even this was not effective with such fine powder, and constantly he had to blink away grains that got through. Even worse, he was no longer certain of his direction. He had an almost preternatural sense of direction, far more acute than that of a civilized man, honed by many years spent in every sort of wilderness, from the ice-fields of Asgard to the dense,

swarming jungles of the south, but there were limits even to his instincts.

With no light, no landmarks, no feel of wind, he had no point of reference, only an inner sense that was no longer reliable. Even though he knew that the wizard could not keep up this unnatural "sandstorm" for much longer, it was not within his nature to halt and wait passively for better conditions. Always, it was his urge to fight and forge onward, to meet all challenges head-on. Nevertheless, there was nothing to be gained by it on this night. He might even become turned around and blunder right back into the wizard's camp.

He decided to stop while he was still half-certain that he was going in the right direction. Testing the sand beneath his feet for firmness, he sank down to sit cross-legged, facing the direction he would set out in when he could see again. With another strip of rag, he fashioned a blindfold to protect his eyes while he waited. Since he could not see anyway, there was no sense in further risking his eyes.

He settled himself to breathe slowly so as not inadvertently to suck in any more of the powder. It was miserable to be sitting still while the sand sifted down over him, and he wished that he had his robe and head-cloth, which would have greatly reduced the discomfort. But there was no way he could have foreseen this eventuality and he could only wait it out stoically, as he had endured so many other torments.

Then, just when he thought that he was adjusted to the worst that could happen, he heard something. He strained his ears, trying to listen through the constant whispering, sifting noise of the falling sand. Then he heard it again: a chittering and rustling, as of bats. But bats would not be flying in this maelstrom. Then the sound came closer, and it was louder than any sound that could possibly be made by ordinary bats.

Cautiously, Conan raised the edge of his blindfold with his thumb. There was nothing save utter blackness. The noise was coming from his right. Then he heard it again from his left. There was more than one of them, whatever they might be. Slowly, making no noise, he slid his sword from its sheath. Even more slowly, he rose, not using his hands, but only uncoiling his long, powerful legs. Standing, he turned his head this way and that, striving to catch every sound.

Then something came to him that set his heart beating wildly. Not a sound this time, but a smell: the sharp, powerful, acid smell of the blade-etcher's shops. Whatever unholy creatures had wiped out the nomad tribe were now stalking him through the sandy darkness. He gritted his teeth and set himself for a terrible death-fight. He heard no more than two of them. Apparently they could not see through the gloom either, for they were not charging straight for him. They were definitely homing on something, though; if not sound, then perhaps upon the heat of his body.

The one on the left sounded marginally closer. Conan did not like fighting in the dark, even against human opponents. It left too much to chance. His barbarian senses could home in on an enemy in the dark, but it was easy to fall victim even to a sword clumsily flailed by a third-rate swordsman under such conditions. Now he faced something he could not see, had never seen before, and whose weaknesses, if any, he did not know. He had no idea of its size or what it fought with, whether fangs or claws or gripping arms. For all he knew, these demons used weapons. He did know that they killed hideously and without compunction.

He had some advantages over that nomadic tribe, though. He had no preconceptions about invincible desert demons to weaken him. His attention was not distracted by the presence of wife or child. Most of all, he had his strength, his speed, a matchless fighting brain and a Cimmerian heart. He would fight fearlessly to the last breath.

His sword poised in both hands, he awaited their arrival. On his left, the pitch of the chittering raised. The creature had found him. There was a rushing, rustling sound and the Cimmerian felt the brush of displaced air. He whirled, crouching, the full power of arms and back in the horizontal slash of his sword. It connected with something and he dragged the blade free even as he dived to one side, rolling and then springing to his feet, facing back the way he had come.

There was an earsplitting shriek and he felt a fierce rush of satisfaction. They could be hurt! He had

wounded that one, and what could be hurt could be slain. Another rush came and he cut again, but this time, his blow met nothing. It had come hi below his blade, but he wasted no breath in cursing. With a wrist-straining change of direction, he brought the blade straight down even as something hit him in the midsection. He felt his blade bite just as he was bowled over and something tore at his back with a red blaze of pain.

He grasped a hide that seemed to be graced with both hair and scales, and he heaved at it while he bashed with his pommel against where he guessed the thing's head should be. Something gave with a crunch and he was sprayed with hot, foul liquid. His hewing and striking redoubled as the reeking fluid began to bum his skin with a pain worse than fire.

Conan drew back his arm and thrust with all his might, driving the long blade through what might have been bone, and into soft vitals. There came the awful keening again, and the thing let go. This time, the Cimmerian rolled away, over and over, trying to scrub off the bunting liquid. Luckily, the sand seemed to absorb most of it, and it came off along with the grease of his camouflage paint.

He scrambled to his feet and waited, his hilt gripped tight in bom his powerful hands. He could hear the things and they were angry, but they were also hurt. The screeching of one slowly quieted into a final, abrupt squawk. He smiled grimly. That one was surely dead. The other searched about, chit-tering and moaning, but there was a dragging sound, too, as if one of its limbs were crippled. In time, silence reigned.

Conan remained still for a while, ah! but suffocated by the acid reek. Then, slowly, he crouched and plunged his sword into the sand again and again, cleansing it of the stinking liquid. He set himself to wait once again.

After an hour, he detected a faint light through the cloth of his blindfold. With a thumb he raised the band once more. This time, he could see for several paces. The light was diffuse, but he knew that its source lay to his left and so he was facing south. A few minutes later, the sand had settled and he took the bandages from his eyes and mouth and nostrils. The morning sun was rising above the dunes to the east and he stood in a landscape devoid of all traces of human or animal passage. The uncannily raised dust had settled thickly over everything.

Before even seeking his bearings, the Cimmerian searched the sands nearby, working in a widening spiral, for signs of his fight. As he searched, he noted that his bare chest and shoulders were liberally dotted with red spots, many of them bearing angry blisters in their center. He examined the cloths he had used for veil and blindfold and saw that the multiple folds now had many small holes in them. He knew then how easily he might have been blinded. The creatures had acid blood, or spittle.

He came to an irregular heap in the sand and drew his sword to poke at it with the tip. He noticed that the once-bright steel was now stained with streaks of black, brown and blue. He brought the steel closer to his eyes and saw that it was pocked with many toy pits. More acid damage. It was good that he had so thoroughly cleaned his blade, else it might have been badly weakened

His prodding of the sand turned up a pile of puzzling fragments. If they resembled anything in his experience, it was the shattered shell of a crab. But this shell was shaped in many small humps and it bore scraps of lumpy, leathery skin. In spots, the skin sprouted clumps of greasy hah". He found a bandlike collection of talons and knew that this was what had clawed at his back. From its attached arm-bone dangled a tough flap that resembled the membrane of an atrophied bat's wing.

A single, long toe bore a hooked claw of a milky, translucent substance like alabaster It looked fragile, but when he drew its point down his stained, pitted sword-blade, it left a long, bright scratch in the hard steel. Claws like this had made the scratches in the stone near the site of the ambush massacre.

A final flip of the blade brought up the thing's skull. "Crom and Llyr!" he swore. The skull was almost human in shape and proportion. But instead of human jaws, it had a series of fingerlike palps that worked vertically, like those of an insect. And instead of deep eye sockets, it had a pair of shallow, circular pits that took up twice me space of human eyes. There was no trace of a nostril opening. It was crushed in on one side, where his pommel had smashed the bonelike chitin.

The creature seemed to combine the traits of many beasts: bat, insect, even reptile. Beneath the fragments was a glassy amalgam, some of it adhering to the bits of shell and bone. Was this the effect of its acid fluids on the sand below? Or was it the softer parts of the creature itself dissolving? The dissolution of the thing was unnaturally rapid.

In the past, Conan had had much unwanted experience with uncanny creatures, and he knew that things called from another world often failed to maintain their structural integrity in this one, when the magick force that had called them forth was withdrawn, or when their otherworldly life fled, leaving their bodies lifeless in a world in which they did not belong.

He resheathed his sword and turned away from the repellent remnants. It was time to search for his companions.

Eight

The sun stood high above the horizon when the Cimmerian stopped and cursed. At first the curses were whispered, then muttered. Soon he was cursing in a conversational tone and, finally, he bellowed in rage and frustration. The Cimmerian pantheon had little scope for blasphemy, so he quickly switched to the deities of Asgard and Vanahiem: robust gods of simple tastes. He worked his way through the sophisticated pantheon of Nemedra and then on to the truly decadent and scabrous gods of Zamora. Not only was he angry, he was embarrassed, a rare feeling for him.

For one of the very few times in his life, Conan of Cimmeria was lost.

Look in whatever direction he might, he saw only the limitless dunes. He had been slogging south all morning, certain that he was heading directly toward his companions, but within the first hour, he knew that he had somehow missed them. He began to work his way southward in zigzag fashion, like a ship tacking into the wind, in hope of cutting their trail.

Still nothing. Having no choice, he kept on going south. That was the direction in which they were headed, and that was the only way he would find them. It never crossed his mind to turn north and try to forge his way back. If any man could make it alive, he could, but it was not his nature to abandon companions in adversity.

As he trudged on, he thought of Achillea. Was she as lost as he was? He feared so. If so, she was in even greater danger than he, for the sun was rising, and here the sun was the greatest enemy. Near-naked as she was, the searing rays could kill her before nightfall. He was as bare as she to the elements, but he had endured many years in the hottest southern lands, while this was her first journey hither. And inured as she was to the stem northern climate, it would probably not occur to her how vulnerable she was.

What rags he could assemble he tied into a makeshift headscarf. It was better than nothing to keep the searing, brain-numbing rays of the sun from his scalp. For the rest, he would just bum and make the best of it. Here there was no bush or tree, no cloth or hide for a tent, not so much as a rock overhang to offer shelter. The deep desert was a sun-baked wasteland where the only shadow was his own.

Before him, the beat-haze shimmered from the sands. In the lower spots, the desert mirage made silvery lakes. He knew that the realism of the "water" would increase with the viewer's thirst. Even experienced desert-farers could end up chasing mirages when they grew truly parched.

With the brute endurance of his kind, the Cimmerian strode onward, ignoring the sun, ignoring the heat, ignoring his growing thirst. He gave no thought to hunger. A man would die of thirst long before hunger became a cause for concern. When the searing glare of sun off sand caused him to squint despite the black paint remaining around his eyes, he tore a strip of cloth from his erstwhile blindfold and bound it over his eyes. The action of the acid had reduced it to the semblance of gauze, and he could see quite well through it, while it reduced the glare to a tolerable level.

The sun was low in the west, throwing his shadow long across the sand, when he found the footprints. They angled from the northeast, and he crouched to study them eagerly. They were large for a woman, but he recognized them as the marks of Achillea's high-arched feet. The woman never wore footgear, and he had seen enough of her tracks during the journey to recognize them instantly.

The signs restored his energy, and he sped along following them, no longer cutting his zigzags across the landscape. The others could take their chances for the nonce, his only concern right now was to find the Amazon queen.

For miles, the tracks bore Achilea's characteristic, long-legged stride; then they began to falter. At first they left long, heel-dragging marks behind them, a sign that she was not lifting her feet as high with each step. Then the tracks blended into one another. She was taking shorter steps, not getting her feet quite clear of the sand. She was weakening fast.

Soon he found signs that she had fallen: pits made by her knees, handprints where she had pushed herself back up again. Not far after that, she began to fall full-length, pushed herself up, then staggered on a while. Her once-straight line to the south began to wobble and weave. Once, for a few steps, she got turned around and doubled back north for several paces, but she must have seen her own footprints, for she turned back south again. When he saw that she was going on all fours, he knew she had to be close. The lower rim of the sun was touching the western horizon when he found her.

She lay in a small depression in the sand, curled on her side. Even the hardened Cimmerian winced when he saw how fiercely the sun had burned her. Her weather-browned skin was brick-red. At least she seemed to be breathing. He rushed to her side and crouched beside her, gently rolling her onto her back.

"Leave me," she said, her voice no more than a croak. She stared upward but did not seem to see him. "I want no man to see me like tis. Go away. No, cover me with sand first and let me die. I do not want to be seen like this even dead."

He smiled grudgingly. She still had the spirit to defy him. "You give up too easily, woman. We'll live through this."

"Cimmerian? Nay, I'll not live, nor do I want to. I am blind. If I'd the strength, I would have put an end to it with my dagger."

Conan waved a broad hand before her eyes and drew no response. "When did you lose your sight?"

"Just before I fell for the last time. Perhaps an hour ago. My vision had been fading since afternoon. The sun of these parts has struck me blind. This is not my land and it does not want me here. The sun is the only lord in this forsaken place."

"Just an hour? Then cheer up; it is merely temporary. You are just glare-blind. Has it never happened to you in a sunlit snowfield?"

"Aye, but it never hurt this much."

"It is the same anyway. You will be able to see by mom-ing, and we'll make you an eye-mask like the one I have been wearing since noon."

"Truly?" she croaked, a note of hope creeping into her voice.

"I promise. The sun is almost down. When it is fully dark, we'll go on. Rest for now."

"I must find my women and Jeyba," she muttered. "I am their queen and I cannot leave them alone in this hellish place."

"Keep to that thought," Conan said approvingly. "You are not as ordinary women and you must not die like one."

She said no more and fell unconscious in his arms. At last the sun was below the horizon, giving blessed relief from its terrible rays. In the swiftly fading light, he examined her. As near as he could tell, she bore no wounds save those inflicted by the sun. Her feet were not bleeding, their soles as tough as the leather covering of a shield. All that was to the good.

He let her sleep for about three hours, the rest restoring his own strength. Then he gently shook her awake. She jerked abruptly with surprise, her hands going for her weapons. Her face whipped around, her eyes gone wide. Then her shoulders stumped.

"I am still here," she said dully. "And I am still blind."

"You'll see by morning," he assured her once more, getting to his feet. He took her hands. "Now get

up. We must be go-ing. She uncoiled to her full height. Her face was a rigid mask as she forced herself not to cry out. He knew that she must feel as if she had been flayed of every square inch of her skin. He was not in much better condition himself, "I know," he told her. "You feel as if you've been dipped in boiling oil. It won't kill you, although you may wish it had."

"How can I travel blind?" she asked. Her voice was a little stronger and less hoarse than before.

"Put a hand on my shoulder and walk behind me," he said. "I'll tell you of any dangers in our path."

And so they set out beneath the desert moon, the stars blazing overhead in their countless millions, Conan strode confidently, the need to guide the blind woman slowing him only a little. She was too proud to take hesitant steps.

"Can you see any moonlight at all?" he asked her.

"Not a bit," she answered, shaking her head so that he felt the ends of her tawny hair brushing across his back. "How do you stand it so well? You are a Northerner, too."

"But I am a Cimmerian," he said, as if that explained everything. She snorted in derision.

Her strength held up well through most of the night. The absence of the sun made a tremendous difference. As the moon set in the west, she paused for a moment and pointed in that direction.

"Is that the moon?"

"Aye. Can you see it?"

"Just a little glow," she said doubtfully.

"But it means that your vision is coming back. Did I not tell you it would?"

"You did," she said grudgingly. "But a little glow is not the vision of the eagle. Still, it's a beginning."

Onward they went. With the moon down, they had only starlight, but in the desert, even that was enough to bestow tolerable vision to the Cimmerian. When the sun began to stain the horizon, he fashioned a blindfold for Achilea.

"I can see the dawnlight," she said. "But of all the things I might see, the last thing I want to see is the sun!"

She gritted her teeth and walked on. This time, the Cimmerian rested a hand upon her shoulder to guide her. He walked to her left, trying to shelter her as much as possible in his shadow. Soon the confidence of her steps told him that she could now see tolerably well through the gauzy cloth. He also noted with wry amusement that she did not tell him to take his hand away.

"That sandstorm," she said as they trudged. "Was that a natural thing?"

"Nay, it was wizardry. Even in this desert, the one thing sand cannot do naturally is to rise without wind. Did the desert demons not attack you in the blackness?"

"Desert demons?" Then he had to tell her of his desperate, blind fight against the unholy things. She seemed doubtful. "Two of the things that wiped out that caravan? And you slew one and drove the other off without even being able to see them?"

"I did not come away altogether unhurt. I will show you the marks when your eyes are better."

Well before noon, Achilea began to stagger. She was going on heart alone and her heart was beginning to give out. When the sun was straight overhead, her legs gave out abruptly and she sat on the sand, gasping.

"It is no use," she croaked, forcing the words past her swollen tongue and cracked lips. "You can still wield your blade. Finish me and go on."

"Getting a little dry?" he asked, crouching beside her.

"Do not mock me," she said. "Use your blade."

"If that is the way you want it," he said, "so be it," He drew his dirk and she waited with her head high and proud.

He pulled off her blindfold and she glared at him, her sight fully restored. Conan stretched his heavy-muscled arm before her eyes and with the tip of his dirk, he opened a vein in his forearm.

"There," he said. "Drink."

"Do you think I am a vampire?" Her eyes held revulsion, and something like wonder.

"That is Cimmerian blood, woman, the strongest in the world. Don't waste it" He grasped the back of her neck and pressed her mouth to his arm. She struggled weakly for a while; then she gave in and drank. When he released her, she sagged to the sand. His small wound was already healing, the blood clotting to seal it.

"You are a strange man, Conan," she said, her strength even now beginning to return.

"And you are not like other women," he said. "That is not something I do for just anyone."

She looked at him and, abruptly, broke into laughter.

"What is so funny?" he asked, nonplussed.

"You look like a spotted cat!" she said, pointing to his chest, which was liberally splotched with small acid burns.

"It's what comes of fighting demons in the dark. Now do you believe me?"

"Very well," she said. "I agree to believe you this time. Shall we go on? I am feeling better."

"We might as well. The sun burns you here whether you move or sit still."

They rose and went on. By late afternoon, the strength lent by his blood was exhausted and she felt once more, too worn out even to speak. Conan was not in a speaking mood either. Without a word, he stooped, gathered her into his arms and hoisted her over his shoulder. Her substantial weight was a burden, but his strength was great and he strode no more slowly for the warm mass of her lying across his back. Each hour he shifted her from one shoulder to the other through the remainder of the day and all through the starry night.

He walked like an automaton, putting one foot in front of the other with perfect regularity, ignoring the pain of his burns and the soreness of his shoulders, aware only that he must live and get Achilea to water and shade, and that soon. She would not survive another full day of the desert sun. So stupefying was the mind-numbing labor that as dawn came, he did not at first notice the riders.

Conan's head jerked up abruptly when he heard the high-pitched cries and saw four camels bearing down upon them. The sun was just above the horizon, and he laid the woman gently on the sand, drawing his sword as he straightened. Then he heard jubilant whoops and he was surrounded as the three wild women and the dwarf all but dived off their mounts to get to their queen. To his amazement, they carried fat water skins.

The women cradled their queen, kissing her face and pouring water over her in prodigal quantities, thrusting the neck of one of the skins into her mouth. Achilea drank thirstily, coughed, vomited water, then drank some more. Tears made black streaks down their faces.

"Easy there," Conan said, barely able to force the words past his swollen tongue. "Too much water at once and you'll kill her." The women ignored him, spreading robes over Achilea, lifting her to one of the beasts.

The dwarf walked to Conan and handed him a water skin. "How far did you carry her?"

The Cimmerian took a mouthful of water, rinsed his mouth, then forced himself to spit the water out on the sand. He then took a small sip and swallowed it. The relief was as intense as anything he had ever felt in his life.

"All last night and most of yesterday. She was blind for a while." He took another cautious sip and swallowed it.

To his amazement, the little man threw a pair of stubby arms around his waist and grasped him in a fierce hug. "You saved our queen! We are your slaves for life!"

"Where did you get this?" Conan asked, holding up the water skin.

"You will see. It is not far. Come." The women had Achilea loaded on a camel, with Lombi holding her steady. Conan mounted one of the beasts, the dwarf behind him. As they rode, he continued to sip at the water. He could feel the blessed fluid making its way from his stomach to his parched tissues.

"Where are the others?" Conan asked.

"They wait for us," said the dwarf. "Some of diem, anyway," he amended. "Now, tell me what happened after you left the camp." So Conan whiled away the time describing the spy mission, the fight and flight from the camp, the dust storm and his strange, blind combat with the desert demons.

Two hours after their rescue, Conan's water skin was almost empty and he was feeling much restored. His hunger was returning as well. Then they crested a dune and he saw the city.

It lay in a perfect, circular depression, just as Amram had described it. It was not huge, but it seemed to consist almost entirely of elaborate buildings, with little open land inside the walls. Before the sparkling gate he saw the great water-trough Amram had mentioned, and near it were tethered some camels. Tents had been erected close by.

As they descended the dune, he noticed that the tall, white camels were missing. "Where are the twins?"

"We think they're inside," the dwarf admitted. "You'll hear about it anon."

The Hyrkanians rushed up to them, grinning. "We rejoice to see you, Conan!" Kye-Dee said.

The Cimmerian dismounted stiffly, his sunburned hide screaming with pain. "I notice you didn't come looking for us," he said sourly.

Kye-Dee grinned some more, shrugging. "It seemed that the gods of this place had stranded you. It is very unwise to provoke the gods."

"Crom preserve me from those with religious scruples," Conan grouched, walking to the great trough. He saw that water poured into it continuously from one end and flowed over a spillway in the opposite end. Much as he wanted to explore the place and find out what had occurred, the water drew him more strongly. Throwing off his weapon-belt, he crouched beneath the spillway and let the water flow over him, sluicing his hair, washing the remaining sand and grease from his body. The pain was excruciating, but when he straightened, clean for the first time in days, he felt like a new man.

The women carried Achilea to the trough and gently lowered her into the water. Her eyes sprang open wide and she screamed while they dipped water over her head.

"Careful there!" Conan barked. "She's been badly burned."

"We know that!" snarled Payna. Then her fierce scowl was replaced by a flush of shame. The woman threw herself down and placed her forehead against his feet. "Forgive me, ray lord! You saved our queen and we worship you!"

The dwarf grinned up at him cockily. "It's not easy for them to be civil to a man."

"They are creatures of extremes, that is for certain," Conan said. He helped the women rig an awning to shade Achilea while she soaked in the trough. Then he went to sit in the shade of a tent while he ate from their store of provisions, washing down every mouthful with a generous draught of water. The dwarf joined him and when Conan was done eating, the little man explained what had happened.

"After the two of you left upon your mission, we waited. The Hyrkanians slept, the twins were deep in converse with Amram—"

"Speaking of him, where is Amram?" Conan asked.

"You shall hear. We were awaiting Achilea's return when the great cloud of dust darkened the moon. It was upon us before we knew what it was. Even as it struck, I saw Amram and the twins mount their camels and ride off south, disappearing into the darkening cloud.

"We sat out the uncanny storm in great misery, calling our queen's name in hope that she would hear us and be guided, but she did not come. In the morning, the dust settled and we were alone. We saw nothing at all. The women wanted to search immediately, but I urged that we find water first, then search."

Conan nodded. "That was the wisest policy."

"Aye. I felt that she might have passed us in the darkness and that we were as likely to find her by riding south as by sweeping north. If the twins and Amram had deserted us, it had to be because the city, and its water, were near. Within half a day's ride, we picked up the trail of the twins and Amram, and a few hours after that, we found this place. We gave the camels water and a little rest, filled our water

skins, and began to sweep the desert to the north."

"And you saw nothing of the twins, nor of Amram?"

"We followed their tracks right up to that gate," he said, pointing at the great doors in the city wall,

"It was discourteous of them to take such unceremonious leave of us," Conan said. "When Achilea is rested and well, we must go in there and rebuke them." With that, the Cimmerian yawned, stretched out upon a blanket, and was fast asleep.

He slept through the rest of the day and all that night, waking at dawn the next morning. The first light stained the eastern horizon as he left the tent and walked past the somnolent camels to plunge his head into the water of the trough. He straightened, snorting, and shook his head, whipping his black hair around, spraying droplets of water for yards.

He went to Achilea's tent and looked in. The three wild women were asleep, sitting upright with their legs stretched before them. Achilea, her skin too sensitive for the touch of a blanket, lay naked across their thighs with her head in Payna's lap. Her heels rested upon the belly of Jeyba the dwarf, who snored lustily. They had rubbed her face and body with oil, and she gleamed softly in the morning light. He backed out of the tent, satisfied that Achilea's breathing was strong and regular. He knew that she would recover quickly now; she was the strongest woman he had ever encountered.

The Hyrkanians lay upon their blankets, sleeping as peacefully as dogs, with no care or thought. Grass grew on the ground near the trough, nourished by the overflow. There was enough to provide the camels with forage for several days, although there were no trees or even so much as a bush. It was time to explore.

First, he surveyed his surroundings. Something about the perfect bowl of the depression disturbed him. It did not look like any natural formation of the desert, for the dunes marched inexorably, the sands blown from their crests to pile against their leeward slopes as more sand was blown from the windward side to the crest. Thus the dunes moved, like infinitely slow waves in a brown-white sea. They did not form perfectly round craters. It was as if a circular barrier had been erected around the dead city.

Then he remembered what it reminded him of: the barrier in the grass around the ruined temple where he had seen the twins communing silently with the bearded ancient. There, the unseen and uncanny barrier had been in the form of a great rectangle; here, it was a circle, but he sensed a sameness.

He walked to the tall gate and examined it. The story of the opals was true. They gleamed amid the carvings of an intricate geometric design, and the edges of the carvings were as crisp and clear as if they had been finished no more than a few days before, not exposed to many centuries of wear. Even stranger were the gates, for even the most massive of timbers should have perished long since in this climate. He felt sure that this was not the last uncanniness he was to encounter at Janagar.

Slowly, he walked a full circuit of the walls, studying every stone, looking for low spots, cracks, hanging vines, anything that might provide easy access. But the walls were perfectly intact, and he saw no trace of greenery upon them. They were not so high that he could not cast a noose over them, but the parapets were smooth, lacking merlons or finials or any other projection that might give a noose purchase. It had never occurred to him or any of the others to bring along grapples, and they had no smithing tools with which to fashion grapples from their available metal.

The city was a spectacular apparition in the trackless desert, but it was not as large as many of the great cities Conan had seen in his travels. By the time he completed his circuit of the walls, it was still morning. The Hyrkanians and the dwarf sat eating their breakfast. Kye-Dee grinned at his approach.

"Did you find us a back door?" he asked.

"No, not that I had much help, with you rogues lying abed all morning. An enemy could have crept up and slit all your throats."

"Some men are born to rise early and work," Kye-Dee said. "The rest of us know how to live well. What did you find?"

So Conan described what he had found and the Hyrkanian nodded. "You Cimmerians are said to be first cousins to the mountain goat," he said. "Did you try to scale the walls?"

"In a dozen places. The stones are too well fitted and they are not worn at all. With purchase for only the tips of my fingers, I could climb them, for they are not all that high, but I could not find even that. It is not right for stones so ancient to remain so smooth."

"It is a magick place," the dwarf said, frowning. "No good will come to us here."

"That's to be seen," Conan said. "I'll not leave it without some answers." He turned to Jeyba. "How fares your queen?"

"She rests. She wakened for a little this morning and we gave her some water. Now she sleeps again."

"It is good that she sleeps," said the Cimmerian. "Her body will heal the faster for it." He got up. "Come, Jeyba, and look over this gate with me."

They walked to the gate and the dwarf kicked at the heavy wood as if testing it for termites. "We could try burning it," he suggested.

"Wood this dense does not take fire readily," Conan said. "It could take days to smolder through. But that is not why I called you away from the others."

"Why, then?"

Conan fixed his burning-blue eyes on the dwarf. "How did she lose her queendom, Jeyba? How did she become a wanderer without a tribe?"

The dwarf frowned and would not look at him. "I know not. It is something she never speaks of, even to me, and I have followed her faithfully for years."

"And the women, they have said nothing?"

Jeyba shuffled uncomfortably. "Once . . . just a few words."

"And those words were?" Conan persisted.

"Well ..." he looked around as if to see whether anyone was listening "... I tell you this only because you have proven your loyalty to our queen."

"I understand," Conan said impatiently. "Go on!"

"Well, once, years ago, Lombi got drunk in the wineshop of a village we were sacking. She told me that when Achilea had been queen for less than two years, she sinned against her people so terribly that almost all turned against her, led by her younger sister. Her only supporters were her 'wilderness sisters.' Those were the young women who shared her year abandoned in the wilds. Such women share a special bond throughout life. They were driven from the tribe and her younger sister became queen. When Achilea took me in, there were still nearly a score of these wilderness sisters. Now she has only three left."

"And Lombi told you no more?" Conan asked.

The dwarf shook his massive head. "She had no chance. Payna came in and overheard a few words. She beat Lombi half to death and swore to do far worse to me if I ever repeated what I had heard. There, Cimmerian, my life is in your hands, for she meant it."

"You've nothing to fear," Conan assured him. "Anyway, just now I've other things on my mind."

"How to get into this city?" the dwarf asked.

"That is one of them. Then there is the pack of followers who were just behind us on the trail here. Where are they? This was their destination, but they've not shown up. They should have passed me while I was afoot, yet they did not. What game are they playing?"

"Perhaps they suffocated in the sandstorm," Jeyba hazarded. "Mitra knows, we almost did!"

"That I doubt," Conan said somberly. "Would that wizard have summoned up a storm that would kill them all? Nay, from his words, he seemed like one who waits and watches, letting others run the risks so that he can sweep up the plunder afterward. I think he may be a few dunes distant, watching."

All that day, they rested, mended damaged equipment and tended to the camels. In the evening, Achilea appeared, in pain but walking. "Tomorrow we go into that city," she announced.

Conan could not suppress a grin when he saw Achilea emerge from her tent the next morning. "Are you sure you feel up to this?" he asked.

She scowled at him. "It takes more than a little sunburn and thirst to stop one such as I, you Cimmerian dog."

This time, he laughed outright. She walked more stiffly than a man in full armor, and her skin was peeling as if she were shedding it like a snake. The new flesh beneath was as pink as that of a baby. She tried to maintain her stern scowl, only to smile and laugh weakly.

"All right, I look like a dying lizard, not like a queen. I am still a warrior, though, and I am ready to sack that town." She pointed to the hulking shape of Janagar.

Conan eyed the gate. "We do not have to do this, you know," he said. "We agreed to escort them here and protect them along the way. We did that. We could just gather all the water we can bear and ride away, our task finished with honor."

"Aye," she said, glowering beneath her fine brows. "We could. But it would not satisfy me. Greater reward was implied. They said we were to have a share in the treasure. I want to look for it, even if it is no more than moonbeams in their minds." She frowned. "Most of all, though, I do not like the way they treated us—riding off into the storm as if we were no more than dogs. I do not accept being treated with dishonor."

"Neither do I," Conan said approvingly.

"Then let us go find them."

"Come with me," Conan said. "I've an idea." They walked to the gate, where Jeyba stood with a coiled rope in his hand. Kye-Dee held a camel by its halter, looking up at the gem-set lintel with greedy eyes. The other Hyrkanians stood by, watching the proceedings with interest. Achilea's women followed behind her.

"Now what?" Achilea said.

"Jeyba claims he is a strong man," said Conan. "We are going to see how strong. Jeyba, mount the beast and stand atop its back. If you straddle its hump, you can rest your feet on its spine."

"Whatever you say." The dwarf mounted the camel and stepped up onto its back. The beast did not like the unfamiliar sensation and shifted, but Kye-Dee held its head steady.

"Are you going to try what I think you are?" Achilea asked, amusement showing through her mask of pain.

"Watch," said Conan. Like the mountain goat Kye-Dee had mentioned, he sprang lightly onto the camel just behind its neck, then up its back. "Steady, now," he said as he stepped up onto the dwarf's muscular shoulders. Jeyba grimaced, but he grasped Conan's ankles and kept his balance.

Standing steady upon the dwarf, Conan stretched upward.

At fullest extension, his fingertips just touched the massive lintel stone above the gate. "Let go now!" he told the dwarf. His ankles released, Conan pulled himself upward, anchored by the tips of his fingers alone. Teeth gritted, he slowly ascended until his face was pressed flat against the carved stone. Then he released his grip of one hand, stretched his arm full-length and began to pull himself up by the strength of that arm. His whole upper body turned scarlet with the strain, the great muscles of his shoulders and back standing out in bold relief and looking more solid than the stone he was climbing.

Those below gasped in admiration at the incredible display of strength. Hand over hand, the Cimmerian pulled himself up over the carved surface until he could get his toes into the recesses of the stone. After that, the climb went much more easily and he went up like a fly ascending a wall. The second his fingers grasped the parapet, he pulled himself over the wall and onto a sentry-walk on the other side,

Conan looked around him, ignoring the clapping coming from his companions on the outside. He saw many buildings and a small plaza just within the gate. All was utterly deserted. Satisfied that no ambush awaited, he leaned over the parapet. "Throw me the rope." The dwarf complied, and Conan made one end fast to a stone stanchion that looked as if it had once been a support for a catapult. He cast the rope over the wall.

"Come on up!" he called.

"Should we leave a man or two with the camels?" Kye-Dee asked.

"No. They'll not wander away from water. They would stay here the rest of their lives if the grass would hold out."

"What about those rogues following behind us?" Achilea asked.

"If they come, one or two men will not be enough to protect the camels. Bring provisions, though. We may be here for a while."

Payna came up first, men Lombi and Ekun. The agile women pulled themselves up the rope while "walking" up the wall with their feet. Achilea insisted upon doing the same, although still far from fully recovered. The women watched worriedly while she made slow progress up the wall. As she was about to give out, Conan reached down and grasped her wrist. With a powerful heave, he brought her up over the parapet and deposited her standing on the walk,

She smiled as she surveyed the scene, her eyes bright with excitement "At last! The treasure city!"

"It's a city, at any rate," said Conan. "Come on, you horse-eating dogs!" he shouted to the Hyrkanians below.

"Are we monkeys to climb ropes?" Kye-Dee said, eyeing the rope and the wall with a wary expression.

"Don't be so timid," Conan said in exasperation. "Just tie a loop in the end of the rope and stand in it. We'll haul you up."

"What is more useless than a Hyrkanian off his horse?" Ekun asked in disgust.

"I heard that!" Kye-Dee yelled.

Eventually, all the Hyrkanians stood atop the wall. Last came Jeyba, after tying water skins and bags of food to the rope.

"Curse it!" Kye-Dee said. "I meant to pry loose some of the opals from the wall on the way up."

"How could you?" Lombi asked, spitting over the walk to the plaza below, "You were grasping the rope with both hands and had your eyes tightly shut."

"Let's go," Conan said. "Everyone pick up a portion of the provisions. We have some people to find."

"And some treasure to pick up," Achilea said.

"That, too," Conan agreed.

As the others gathered their goods and settled their weapons about them, Conan performed a last scan of the crater rim. It was a strange horizon for this desert: a perfectly level stretch of sand, as regular as if it were carved in stone.

"That is odd," he mused.

"What?" Achilea asked.

"Where are the tracks? A good many people and camels have come over that rim and down that slope in the last few days, and there has been no wind to speak of, yet the whole thing is now as smooth as a bowl of glazed clay."

She scanned the view and shuddered a little. "Welt, we knew this place was not natural. It restores itself, like flesh healing."

"I suppose—" The Cimmerian caught a tiny flash of something on the rim of the crater. He pointed toward it. "Do you see something there?"

Achilea squinted at the spot "It is not steel this time, and it is right on the sand It appears purple, like violet glass or—" she cast him an uneasy expression "—like the crystals that wizard toyed with." The others looked warily at the spot

Conan nodded. His eyes were keener and he could make out the tiny man-shape. "It is the homunculus." He tested the fit of his sword in its sheath, "No matter. If the mage had any spirit, he would be down here, not out in the desert sending his little stooge to spy upon us. Come, we have work to do."

A few yards from the gate, they found a stair descending to the plaza below. A minute later, they stood in the little plaza and the Cimmerian noted that it resembled no abandoned town he had ever seen before. There were no leaves littering the flags, no buildup of dirt or sand, no signs of animals having passed through, not so much as a feather dropped by a passing bird. It might have been a city in which all the inhabitants had gone indoors to escape the heat of the day, except that no inhabited city was ever so clean.

"Was ever a place so strange?" Achilea said, a hand resting on her sword-hilt

"Or so silent?" said Lombi.

"Or so lacking in interest?" said Kye-Dee. "Why do we stand here like bumpkins who have never seen a town, much less sacked and burned one? Let's find a palace and get some loot!"

Following this eminently sensible advice, they left the plaza to explore deeper into the city. A road paved with smooth, polished white stone led from the gate area to a short flight of steps that debouched onto small, open courtyard, surrounded by high buildings with lavish balconies, hi its center was a fountain in which water sprayed from the wings of a rising phoenix into the broad, circular pool below.

"This makes no sense," said the dwarf, his eyes searching the skies overhead. 'In the middle of such a desert, so much water should attract every bird that flies past Yet it looks as if none has ever landed here."

"I think you will find that is exactly the case," Conan said.

"Eh?"

"I will explain later. Come on."

They passed many splendid structures, all of them perfectly intact. There seemed to be no straight streets cutting through the city. Instead, many short streets and flights of steps led to squares and courtyards with no overall plan. Sometimes the streets ended in blind cul-de-sacs and they had to pass through buildings to the next street In other places, there were tunnels through large blocks of structures and what appeared to be marketplaces sheltered beneath roofs of translucent alabaster.

In the buildings they saw many paintings, frescoes, mosaics and murals, as well as much statuary, but little of value that was portable. The art depicted scenes of great lascivious-ness and even greater bloodshed, but most of it seemed to be of a ritual nature, as if the religion of the people who had lived in Janagar was dedicated solely to the gods of blood and fertility.

"What sort of people were they?" Achilea wondered as she roused over one such mural, a vast fresco in which naked bodies, human and demonic, were intertwined in combinations so complex that they eye wearied in trying to follow all the permutations.

Conan shrugged. "I have seen the temples and holy places of many peoples in my travels, from the oak groves of Asgard to the jungle shrines of the black tribesmen and the great altars of the civilized lands between. Most folk try to buy the favor of their gods with rituals and sacrifices and prayers,: hoping to win mercy and avert anger. Their wants are simple, for the most part—good crops, healthy children, victory in battle.

"But there are others—old, rich nations that have forgotten hunger and hardship and misfortune and have known only luxury for many generations. They want to be as gods themselves, and their rites are intended to secure them power, even immortality. The folk of Janagar may have been such a nation."

"Perhaps that is why they were destroyed," Achilea said,

"Were they destroyed?" the dwarf asked, gazing doubtfully at the buildings all around them, perfect in every detail.

"They must have been," Achilea said. "This city is untouched, completely without life. It is as the twins said—the people of Janagar fled in a single night and no one ever came back."

Something in her words struck Conan as wrong, though he could not say what it was. "This place is a maze," he announced. "Let's climb one of these towers and get our bearings from the top."

They came to a spacious building with tall, slender, star-topped towers ascending from each of its comers and went within. Before them lay a vast chamber, capped with a low dome. The chamber was

filled with sculptures in which stone, metal, glass and ceramic were combined to render the figures incredibly lifelike. Here, once again, were depicted rituals involving the most abandoned love making along with the ghastliest bloodshed.

"At last!" cried Kye-Dee, pointing to a sculptured group depicting a hideously masked priest and his sacrificial victim. The victim was a beautiful, bound woman from whose slashed throat blood poured in the form of cascading rubies, garnets and amethysts. At sight of genuine treasure, one of the Hyrkanians strode to the artifice, opening the flap of his belt-pouch as he reached for the jewels.

Conan's avarice was aroused as well, but something in the repellent nature of the fabulous sculptures made him uneasy. "Wait," he said. "Best not—" But the man ignored him, eyes wide and gleaming with greed. He grasped the cascade of jewels and instantly his body went rigid, save for his head, which snapped back with an audible crunch of bones. His tongue thrust forth, along with a strangled cry of anguish as his eyeballs started from their sockets. Wisps of smoke rose from his grasping hand; men black, greasy smoke poured in a thick column from his gaping moun.

Before their horrified eyes, the man's flesh hissed and bubbled and fell away from his bones as he was consumed by unnatural, invisible fire. In minutes, there remained only a heap of blackened bones in a pool of steaming, sizzling fat. Alt the flesh and blood had been consumed.

"These people may be long dead," Achilea said, her voice as hoarse as it had been at the end of her desert trek, "but their curse is still strong. Touch nothing until we know it is safe to do so."

"We will perform the rites for him when we return to our homeland," Kye-Dee told his surviving companions. "Unless one of you wants to collect his bones now?" The others made vigorous signals of negation.

"Come," said Conan, his dread about the city now redoubled.

They went to a comer of the great room and entered the tower. The doorway opened onto a spiral stairway and they began to ascend. The steps turned to the left as they climbed, and this struck the Cimmerian as odd. All such stairways in his experience spiraled to the right on the ascent—castle towers were designed so that an attacker's sword-arm was crowded against the central pier, while the retreating defender had a wide sweep for his own weapon-arm.

The stairs, broad at first, became more narrow and cramped as they climbed. The tower was subtly tapered, a designer's and builder's stratagem that reduced the weight load, saved on materials and gave a viewer below the illusion that the tower was taller than it really was, all at once. Just when the passage was almost too narrow for Conan's broad shoulders, they stepped out onto a broad platform that encircled me tower. The platform was provided with a waist-high railing of marble carved into a lacy, openwork design of twining vines. They stepped out warily, doubtful that the seemingly fragile structure could be solid after so long an abandonment.

"First," Conan said, "let's see if our followers are lurking out there." He peered out over the city wall. "Crom!" The others gasped and made sounds of disbelief. Hands went to protective amulets, and spells were muttered.

They could see for miles, and beyond the city walls mere lay no desert, but rather endless acres of tilled land, divided into orderly fields by low walls of stone and well-trimmed hedges. Straight canals cut through the landscape. At intervals stood cranelike, counterweighted devices for raising water from the canals into the fields. In the distance they could see houses that looked like the mansions of fine country estates,

"What is this?" Achilea cried.

Conan placed his broad hands on the railing and peered over the edge, into me city below. The others did likewise. There were people in the streets, people dressed in colorful garb. As they watched, a procession of warriors rode through a street, light flashing from their gilded armor and the bronze frontlets on their horses' brows.

Slowly, they circled the tower. They saw that from the broad, steplike terraces of the largest buildings there hung huge, flower-rich vines in overgrown masses. In the terrace gardens, tall

trees—cedar and cypress—pointed to the sky. Fragrant myrrh shrubs and palms heavy with dates grew in profusion. From the altars of the temples, great columns of smoke ascended above the sacrificial fires.

"What is happening here?" Achilea said.

"This is an accursed place!" Payna cried, unnerved. "Let us be away from here, my queen!"

Conan did not like this uncanny turn of events, but he was unafraid. "This is some sort of illusion. We are seeing Janagar as it was in ages long gone. Listen. Hear you any sound? I do not. It is all as silent as when we came through the streets."

"We are very high up," Kye-Dee said doubtfully, having never before been atop such a tower

"We would hear something," Conan insisted. "I have been upon towers far taller than this one and you can still hear the sound of horses' hooves on the streets. Does anyone smell smoke? I do not, yet there are fires all around us."

"Supposing you are right," Achilea said, "where do you think we should go from here?"

"There." Conan's long arm stretched out and he pointed to a vast structure hulking atop a hill in the center of the city. It looked squat, but that was only because of its massiveness. From it towered a dome higher than any other in the city, and made, so it appeared, of innumerable panels of glass. "If the twins are to be found in this city, that must be where they are."

"Look!" said a Hyrkanian, pointing downward. Around the base of their tower came an immense elephant, its flanks pointed with colorful designs and its long, curved tusks plated with gold. Upon its back was the statue of a god or demon, many-eyed and hideous. After it followed other elephants bearing the images of other monstrous deities. Around the beasts flocked musicians who played pipe and drum, horn and tambour, while dancers in furs and feathers whirled ecstatically and other worshipers gashed themselves with knives and flung severed parts of themselves at the idols, all in perfect silence.

"Who they are and what they are doing, I know not," Conan said somberly, "but they have been dust blowing in the wind for thousands of years. By some working of magick, we see them as they once were."

"Let us go," Achilea urged, catching his dark mood.

"These visions of the long-dead oppress me. I do not know if I even want this treasure now. I just want some answers."

They descended the tower and no one spoke so much as a word until they departed the building. Out upon the street, all was as it had been. The warriors and worshipers, the horses and elephants—all were gone as if they had never existed.

"This way," Conan said, more to break the awful silence than because his companions needed the direction. As they walked through the city of silence, something that had been puzzling him crystallized in his mind

"A little while back," he said to Achilea, "you said that this city is exactly as its inhabitants left it when they fled."

"Aye, so I did. What of it?"

He gazed up at a fretted balcony as they passed. A row of vases lined its rail, lacking only flowers. "Have you been in many cities?"

"A few," she replied, frowning. "None this splendid. What of it?"

"I have been in many," the Cimmerian said, "and they are *never* this perfect! Nobody builds a city, complete in all things, and moves into it. Cities grow, like great beasts do. They start as whelps; villages by a stream, or an inlet, or where roads or caravan trails cross. Some grow into good-sized towns and a few become great cities like this one—" he paused and amended "—as this one was. But always they are growing or being repaired. Old buildings are torn down and new ones are raised. Fires gut whole blocks of houses and shops.

"I have seen towns where the temples were always under construction because each of a dozen cults was trying to build theirs bigger than all the others. A fresh-painted house stands next to one on which all the paint has long since flaked off. They are never this perfect!"

"You are thinking too much, Conan," Achilea said, frowning. "I would not expect this of you."

He ignored her jibe, "Somehow, I do not think that the people of Janagar, fleeing in panic, paused to tidy up their city and finish all its building projects before they locked the gates behind them."

"The woman is right, Conan," Kye-Dee chided him. "You think too much." To the wild Hyrkanian, cities were as alien as the stars, so he could discern no oddity about this one. His desires were simple and all he wanted was to find a way to take loot without being struck horribly dead.

As they progressed through the city, they climbed. Toward the center, there were more stairs than streets. Many times they became lost in the maze, entered buildings that had only a single exit, or had to cross from one rooftop or balcony to another, but always they drew nearer the huge building. Often they saw objects of value and were tempted to appropriate them, but the unfortunate Hyrkanian's fate stayed their greedy hands.

At last they passed through a low tunnel and emerged onto a great plaza before the central edifice. There they paused in wonder and gaped. From a distance, the structure had seemed very large. Standing before it, its size was stupefying. The facade was so high that they could not see the colossal dome at all. Lining the parapet atop the building were statues like those they had seen being carried by the elephants in their vision of the Janagar of long ago. From where they stood, the statues appeared to be about man-height, but Conan made a quick estimation of the height of the facade and realized that the things were probably nearer thirty feet tall. So vast a building stunned the human eye's ability to judge proportion.

Every square foot of the stonework of the place was carved in unbelievably intricate detail. From their vantage, they could not make out the individual figures or the overall design, but the immediate impression was one of the mind-boggling labor involved. All the visible stone was of marble—marble of a hundred hues and polished to such brilliance that it was as if the whole building was made of glass and illuminated from within.

"Have you ever seen so great a structure?" Achilea gasped.

"A few," Conan said. "Those were in Stygia, and even there, I never saw any as high. And this is just the front of the place. Remember what we saw from the tower. The dome doubles the height of the building."

"How could mortal hands have built such a thing?" she wondered,

"They did not," said Kye-Dee. "It is clear to me that this place was built by gods or giants."

Conan was almost inclined to credit him. The thought of mere men toiling for untold years, probably over many generations, to erect this oppressively massive edifice was alien to him. It was marvelous, but it seemed detestable that men should spend their lives in such a pursuit. Surely, he thought, these people must have had the souls of ants,

"Nothing to be gained by standing around here," he said, settling the weapon-belt around his lean hips. They walked across the broad plaza surfaced with black and white paving stones set in eye-dazzling geometric patterns. It seemed to take forever to reach the vast building. It appeared to recede before them at their approach. But in time, they stood directly beneath its clifflike facade, gaping at the infinite intricacy of the carvings thereon, which were set row upon row running in continuous bands, interrupted only by windows and the single great entryway.

Each band was crowded with life-size human figures, and if the activities of the sculptures in the temple where the Hyrkanian had died had been scabrous, these were almost super-naturally so. Ekun walked to one especially tangled group of figures and peered at it closely. "That is impossible," she announced at length. "You would need three legs."

"Some of their gods or demons had a superfluity of limbs," said Kye-Dee. "Maybe some of the folk of Janagar were likewise equipped."

Conan was not interested in the carvings. He went to the great doorway and studied it. The twin doors were nearly as large and massive as the city gate. They rose straight for nearly a score of paces and then arched to a point in the center. Around the doorway was a band of carving that looked at first

like entwined vines, a design much used in the city. Closer examination revealed that it did not depict vines, but rather, innumerable serpents, their eyes made of gleaming gems. So realistic were they that the Cimmerian almost expected to see forked tongues flickering in and out of their mouths. Achilea joined him before the door.

"We will need a ram to force this," she said.

"Perhaps we can go in through the roof," Conan mused. "At least this will not be difficult to climb."

"You may climb it," said Kye-Dee. "I will gladly cheer you on. But I am not going to scale that cliff, no matter how many handholds it provides." The other Hyrkanians agreed vociferously.

"Cowards!" Achilea sneered.

"Men are not intended to climb rocks like lizards!" Kye-Dee said, offended.

Jeyba walked to the great door and felt its massive timbers. Idly he gave it a shove, and the door swung inward as easily as would a house door hung on well-oiled hinges, yielding only a slight groan and creak.

"Perhaps this will not be as difficult as we had thought," Achilea said.

"Don't say that until we see what lies within," Conan told her. He drew his sword and strode to the opening. Not to be outdone, Achilea drew her own blade and hurried to walk beside him. Her women and the dwarf were close behind, and the Hyrkanians came last, arrows fitted to the strings of their bows.

Nervous and as alert as cats, the little band walked through a high-arched passageway that was like a great tunnel through the thick walls of the building. As with the outside, its walls bore decorations, but the light within was too dim for them to make out their nature. The heat and glare of the desert day disappeared as they left the door behind them. The air inside was faintly musty, but breathable. Ahead of them, they could see that the tunnel opened into a gigantic room where there was more light.

As they reached the end of the tunnel, they gazed with wonder at the immensity of the cavernous interior. Before they could take it in, a huge, shaggy shape loomed up beside them, bellowing. A Hyrkanian spun and drew his bow, but Conan slapped the weapon aside. The arrow soared off into the distance and was broken against an unseen wall.

"That's a camel, you fool!" Conan barked.

The Hyrkanian, bristling at Conan's unwonted action, grinned sheepishly when he realized his mistake. "I thought it was a demon," he said, shrugging.

The camel whose life the Cimmerian had saved was one of the tall, white ones. Its mate stood just beyond it, along with the smaller, local camel that Amram had been riding. The animals were placidly chewing their cud. They seemed to be slightly indignant at this intrusion.

"This is the first sign we've had of those three," Achilea said. "You were right, Conan."

Slowly, they walked into the vastness of the interior chamber. The light that fell upon the tessellated floor was multicolored and it stained the mosaic in neat, geometric lozenges. Peering upward, they saw that the huge dome overhead was made entirely of glass panels set into a lattice of metal. The individual panels were made tiny by distance, but Conan estimated that each one had to cover the area of a small house. He had never seen such huge panes in his life.

They were halfway across the floor before they realized that the hulking shape at the far end of the chamber was not a part of the building, but rather, an immense idol. The angle of the sunlight left it largely shrouded in gloom, hence their tardiness in recognizing it for what it was. By its location, Conan estimated that it would be fully illuminated only at sunset.

"Is this a god?" Kye-Dee inquired.

"A goddess, if anything," Achilea said dryly.

The figure was vaguely pyramidal in shape: a nude, anthropoid figure seated cross-legged, its multiple arms outstretched, some of its hands grasping weapons, others holding implements of no readily discernible function. Two arms extended straight out from the figure's shoulders, their palms open and empty. The torso bore a dozen breasts arranged in a triple row between shoulders and navel. Its face was serenely beautiful, but the long, narrow eyes carried an expression of inhuman malice. Enormous

jewels gleamed in forehead, eyes and navel. They approached the looming sculpture in awe and trepidation.

"Why would anyone build such a thing?" Achilea asked. "It must be a hundred paces from one knee to the other."

"I do not know," Conan said, "but I am weary of this." He drew a deep breath and bellowed, "Monandas! Yolanthé! Amram! Come out and face us! We would have a few words with you!"

The shouted words echoed from wall to wall of the temple chamber for a long time. Then they faded and a great silence reigned.

"Now what?" the dwarf said. Gingerly, he rapped his knuckles upon the gigantic shin of the goddess. The greater part of the idol seemed to be made of bronze, although no rivets or joints between plates were visible. The method of its construction was a marvel on a par with everything else they had seen.

"Well," Achilea said, irritated, "where do we—" Her words ended abruptly when the idol emitted a long, deep groan from its innards.

"What is this?" Jeyba said, alarmed. There was more groaning and creaking, as if something massive were shifting within the idol. They backed away from the huge thing, looking upward as if expecting to see the heavy arms come to life and reach for them. A rushing, hissing sound came from above and they looked around them in near panic.

With a dazzling burst of light, flames erupted from the upturned palms of the outstretched pair of hands. The curled fingers seemed to be grasping great balls of flame, and the glaring, fuming tongues of fire cast shifting shadows across the face of the goddess, giving her an even more sinister expression. To their horror, the narrow eyelids opened wider, exposing scarlet irises dotted with many small, black pupils. The jeweled eyes glowed with an inner fire. The Hyrkanians yammered spells to avert evil and made as if to run.

"Hold!" Conan shouted. "This is no goddess! It is a great automaton, worked by machinery!"

"What of that?" said Kye-Dee. "I want no part of it."

"I run from no puppet," said Achilea, "even if it is the biggest puppet in the world!" Her women crowded close beside her, and Jeyba stood just before them, his bludgeon cradled in his hands.

Conan stood poised, ready to fight or to run, as circumstances should dictate. Had the twins brought this prodigy about? Were they inside, operating the incredibly ancient machinery that sail, against all reason, worked?

There was a rushing of feet and a clatter of harness as a double file of bizarre human figures came running from behind the idol. Within five seconds, they had the intruders surrounded. Conan estimated that there were at least a hundred of them, and more were coming. They were partially clad in bits and pieces of strange armor, but they wore no other clothes. Their numbers were of women as well as of men. All carried weapons and some had nets and ropes. All wore *masks*.

The Hyrkanian who had almost shot the camel drew his bow and loosed. The hard-driven shaft punched easily through a breastplate of black leather and silvery metal and a woman went down, spraying scarlet.

"No!" Conan shouted. "They are too many!"

But the Hyrkanians were too overwrought to hear. At the sight of blood, two more drew their bows as the first reached for another arrow. Instantly, they were enveloped in the meshes of thrown nets, and the nets were followed by viciously barbed javelins. The men squalled like enraged panthers as they were harpooned until they choked on their own blood. Kye-Dee screamed and half-drew his short saber, but the Cimmerian knocked him to the floor with a blow of his massive fist.

"Be still, idiot!" he hissed.

"But they slew my countrymen!" Kye-Dee wailed.

"You countrymen were fools and they died like fools," Conan said pitilessly. "If you want to live, obey orders for a change."

The strange warriors crowded in all around them. They were short but well-muscled, their skins the whitest Conan had ever seen. Of their faces he could tell nothing, for all were grotesquely masked. The masks appeared to be of hammered metal, some bearing the long beaks of birds, others the muzzles of animals, yet others with snarling monkey faces. Their armor was made of leather and polished metal. None wore full armor, only breastplates and greaves and bracers on their forearms, and all of it was spiky, jagged and ornate.

Conan doubted that his band could carve a way through the line of these strange warriors; they would be speared long before they reached the door.

A man in especially ornate armor strode up to them. In his hands he carried a polearm equipped with wicked spikes and hooks and this weapon he pointed toward Conan's broad chest.

"Lower your weapons!" the man cried, his words so twisted that the Cimmerian could scarcely understand them. He repeated the words, this time more shrilly.

"What does he want?" Achilea asked.

"He wants us to disarm," Conan told her.

"Never! If this means a fight to the death, so be it, but I'll not be helpless among strangers!"

"Just keep your hands well away from your weapons," Conan said. "Perhaps that will be enough."

The man barked something and a net came sailing out to blossom open and envelop Achilea. Conan began to draw his sword, only to have a weighted cord whip around his wrist and slow his hand. Then another net settled over him. He struggled against the meshes, but even his iron strength could not prevail against their tough fibers. He heard squalls and he twisted his head around to see that the others were being as efficiently immobilized.

The warriors were well practiced in this maneuver, for they quickly overwhelmed their victims by weight of numbers and trussed them soundly. It took many of them to overcome the Cimmerian, but they had numbers to spare. In minutes, he lay on his belly, his hands bound securely behind him, his ankles shackled with two feet of chain between them. When all were similarly trussed, they were hauled to their feet and the nets and ropes removed from them.

"So much for your orders, Cimmerian!" Kye-Dee spat. "We should have fought our way out!"

"You would have died," Conan said. "We still live and we'll get out of this. Your men probably got us into it. What people do not meet intruders with arms? There was no cause to kill that woman." Though he held his words steady, inwardly he seethed with anger.

"But there was supposed to be no one here!" Kye-Dee protested.

"These folk seem to have their own opinions on the matter," Jeyba remarked.

The man who had spoken stepped aside as a woman came forward to eye the captives closely. She wore a mask of blackened steel in the form of a hawk's face, trimmed with a ruff of white feathers. An abbreviated mantle of black and silver scales covered her shoulders, and closely molded greaves encased her lower legs and knees. Similar guards graced both forearms. A belt of black and silver plates rode her lissome hips, supporting a dagger and a short sword. Except for these items, she was naked,

"Who are you?" she asked in a husky voice through the gaping beak of her mask. She was a small woman, of a slender but wiry build.

"I am Conan of Cimmeria," came the answer, "and this is Queen Achilea of the Amazons. The rest are our followers. We come in search of our friends, whose camels stand yonder." He jerked his head back over one shoulder, indicating the beasts.

"And to do this, you had to slay one of us?" She pointed toward the dead woman, who was being carried toward the great idol.

"It was an error," Conan said. "We expected to find no one here and the fool panicked. He died for it, as did two of the others. The rest of us made no attempt to harm you." He had no idea if this would appeal to her sense of fairness, but he deemed it worth a try.

The woman stepped closer until she stood inches from the towering Cimmerian. With the forefinger of a fine-boned hand, she traced the massive muscles of his chest. "You do not look like the desert men

who sometimes stumble upon the Forbidden City. What is your land?"

"Cimmeria lies far, far to the north of here," he answered.

"Are your countrymen all as large and as strong as you?"

"Almost," he said.

She stepped as close to Achilea and examined her minutely, lightly punching her cobbled belly, feeling the rippling muscles of arms and legs and body as if me queen were a camel she contemplated buying. With the back of one hand, she stroked Achilea's cheek.

"I have never seen a woman such as you. Your land must lie even farther away than his." The masked woman's head barely reached Achilea's shoulder.

"In my own land, I am a queen," Achilea said through clenched teeth, "I am not to be handled in such a fashion."

The masked woman laughed shrilly, her tones echoed by the rest, "You are overdressed, slave!" she said, hauling on Achilea's cloak with all her strength. The cord that held the garment to Achilea's neck snapped. Next, the woman tore off her belt and fox pelt, leaving her dressed only in her fur leggings.

"That is better," the woman said with satisfaction. "You may be comely in your barbaric fashion, when you have done with shedding your skin." She ignored the rest and turned to the bizarre warriors behind her.

"Below with them!" she barked. "We shall soon see what these odd creatures are made of."

The warriors surged forward and began to hustle and the captives toward the immense idol. A wide bronze door creaked open beneath the crossed ankles and they were dragged and pushed within.

Ten

Conan gazed overhead. The gloomy interior of the idol was illuminated by only a few torches, and these revealed an internal bracing of heavy timbers and strong metal beams, held together with bolts as thick as a man's leg. There were huge gears, ten paces across, and levers that must need five or ten men to move. Metal pipes led from no place to nowhere, and thick chains hung in great loops, their upper ends lost in the darkness. He felt a hard point prodding him in the back.

"Stop gaping," the masked woman ordered. "The Great Goddess does not like profane eyes probing her holy interior."

He could not tell whether the woman spoke ironically, for it was hard enough just making sense of her words, so thickly accented were they. Did she truly think this colossal thing to be a goddess, knowing that it was nothing but levers and gears and chains within? He shrugged off the question. If true, it would be far from the most unreasonable religion he had come across in his travels.

Beneath the center of the idol was a spiral ramp, wide enough for ten people to walk abreast. They began to descend. Achilea's women walked close behind her to protect their queen *from* the indignity of the prodding spears. For this, they earned a number of small wounds in their backs, buttocks and thighs. The dwarf strode ahead of her truculently, as if daring anyone to come too close.

The descent seemed interminable. The ramp was of smooth stone, its surface throwing back a reflection from the strange, smokeless torches that burned with a muted hiss every few paces along the wall. As they walked, the Cimmerian's keen perceptions detected a slight relaxation among their captors. Muscles that had tensed along backs and necks smoothed their knotted contours; their stiff-legged stalking eased- It was as if being above had set their nerves on edge and now they felt freer in more secure and familiar surroundings. Conan could hardly guess why this should be. Did these strange folk live down here all the time?

The spiral ramp ended in a wide corridor illuminated by more of the smokeless torches. The walls and ceilings of the corridor were richly decorated with the same designs they had seen so frequently in the town above: intertwining foliage, complex geometric patterns and obscenely coupling human and demonic figures.

They passed openings that gave onto huge rooms where shadowy forms went through incomprehensible rituals or activities, but they never paused long enough to get a good look. As they

continued along, the Cimmerian saw small, pale men and women who wore neck rings, wrist bands, and anklets connected by thin but sturdy chains; these seemed to have the duty of examining the torches and assuring that they remained lit. They passed one extinguished torch, which a man was cleaning with small instruments. As they approached, he finished his task, turned a circular knob and struck sparks above the torch's- copper cup with flint and steel. Immediately, flames burst from the thing as the slave jerked his hands back.

"What is that noise?" Achilea asked, coming out of the melancholy that had gripped her since her capture and subsequent humiliation.

Conan had noticed it as well. It was an all-pervasive susurration, like wind whistling through the chambers of an underground cavern. "I don't know," he said, "It sounds like air moving."

"Silence!" said the masked woman, idly backhanding him across the face. He scarcely felt the blow, but he vowed to make her pay for it someday.

The corridor gave onto huge rooms where some people sat on the floor around tables eating, onto other rooms where robed men, appearing to be alchemists, tended flasks of boiling liquids, glaring furnaces and pipes that took liquids and steam from one place to another. In what seemed to be a temple enclosure, men and women went through an extremely lascivious dance before an idol much like the colossus above, although far smaller. About a third of the population wore the chains and shackles of slaves. Of the free population, half were masked. They all eyed the newcomers curiously, but none sought to hinder the procession or to ask questions.

At one point, the corridor floor became a bridge that passed through an immense chamber full of creaking timbers and the groan of metal upon metal. Above them and below them and to each side were gigantic vertical wheels that turned incessantly, powered by hundreds of slaves who ceaselessly trod the interior rims, keeping the wheels turning. Here the rushing noise was loudest, and Conan understood that this was the power source of the underground city's ventilation system, his civilized lands, he had seen great, slave-worked bellows performing the same service for deep mines, and one or two where the bellows were worked by waterwheels, but this was far more elaborate,

"This is a foul place," Achilea commented. Conan was not inclined to argue with her, but the man who seemed to share command with the woman swatted at her, and the wild women turned upon him, baring their teeth.

"Stop!" Achilea ordered. "You will die needlessly."

"The big woman wants a flogging," the man said.

"I will determine that," the masked woman said sharply, establishing their relative rank.

At last they turned aside from the main corridor and ascended a broad flight of steps, coming into a spacious room with a high-vaulted ceiling from which depended several fixtures that resembled chandeliers. A swarm of interlaced copper pipes made wide baskets, and each pipe terminated in a diminutive flower from which sprang a single white flame, all of them together illuminating the room almost as if with daylight.

Besides the man and woman in charge, only a half-score of warriors entered the room to keep watch on the prisoners. The rest waited without in the hallway. The chamber was unfurnished except for a few large cushions, but several short chains hung from the walls. The chains ended in metal neck rings.

From a small stand, the woman took a flexible, tapering rod the length of her arm and settled its thong around her slender wrist. With the whip, she pointed at the three women, the dwarf and Kye-Dee. "Chain these slaves here. Five warriors stay to guard them. Bring these two—" she pointed to Conan and Achilea "—to my reception chamber."

The women wept at being separated from their queen, but there was nothing they could do. The pitiless iron rings were fastened around their throats.

"Abide here for a while," Achilea told them confidently, as *if* this was by her choice. "We shall all be free anon." The supple whip lashed out and sliced across her shoulders. She made no flicker of expression at this abuse of her already tormented skin.

Prodded by spears, the Cimmerian and the warrior-woman climbed another flight of stairs into a smaller chamber, illuminated in the same way as the one below and carpeted with what appeared to be silk cushions. There were low tables, furnished with beautiful glassware. Four slaves stood ready, all of them lovely young women, slender and as pale as albinos, their white hair cut short, their eyes downcast and their chained hands clasped before them.

Guards fitted Conan and Achilea with neck rings and fastened them by chains to bronze rings set into the floor beneath the cushions. The chains were too short to allow them to stand, so perforce they sat upon the cushions as the slave women tended to their mistress. The warriors retreated from the room, leaving the speaking man behind.

The slaves divested their mistress of her armor and replaced it with a brief robe of silvery cloth. She was perfectly unself-conscious about the display of her naked body, but she turned away from the viewers when the women took off her feather-trimmed metal mask and replaced it with another mask made of the same silvery material. Idly, Conan wondered where in this incredible underground city in the midst of the desert they found the splendid plumes. Whence, indeed, had come those immense timbers?

The woman turned around. The mask revealed only her rounded chin, her full-lipped mouth, and eyes with irises so pale that they could scarcely be distinguished from the surrounding whites. Her pupils were tiny and seemed to be red rather than black. Her hair, now unbound, fell in soft waves over her shoulders. A slave handed her a goblet of carved crystal and she sipped at its contents, studying her captives.

"We rarely have interesting strangers come to the Forbidden City," she said, stepping lightly toward them, goblet poised in one hand, whip in the other. "Usually, only desert men stumble upon the city, wretched and dying from thirst and hunger and the blows of the accursed sun." With her whip hand, she sketched an intricate sign in the air and it was copied by the masked man. It seemed to be an act of vilification at mention of the sun.

"Lately, far stranger people have arrived. Can this be the beginning of a fate long foretold?" She placed her whip beneath Achilea's chin and forced the queen's head up. "I never dreamed a woman such as you could exist; a great, powerful animal possessed of a certain beauty," Suddenly she looked at the masked man. "Do you not find her so, Abbadas?"

"I think she is ugly," the man said, but Conan caught the lie in his words. He was all but licking his lips behind his mask. "Surely these are not human beings, but some species of desert ape strayed from their native haunts."

"I think not," the woman said, chuckling. "And do not try to gull me. You lust for mine one—I do not blame you for it. So ripe and vital a body is far more than our pallid kin have to offer." She turned to Conan. "And this brute has possibilities as well." Then her face snapped toward the man. "But do not touch them for now! They are mine to do with as I please."

The man bowed with ill-concealed hostility. "Never would I defy your wishes, Omia."

"See that you do not. Go now. We will speak of this later."

Reluctantly, the man turned and walked out of the chamber. The woman watched him go, a smile on her full lips. Then she sat on the cushions directly before her captives. Had their hands been unbound, they could easily have slain her. Conan wondered if the woman realized that he could effortlessly kill her with a kick from where he sat. Of course, that would leave him chained to the floor. Doubtless she took that into account,

"My guests need refreshment," Omia said. In seconds, the four slave women crouched by Conan and Achilea, two to each of them. One held a cup, the other a tray of delicacies, Achilea turned her head away, but Conan stopped her.

"Eat," he said. "Strength is important." Reluctantly, she sipped from the cup the slave woman held for her, then she bit into the sweetmeat held to her mouth by the other. The Cimmerian did the same. He found the wine palatable, but it had a bitter undertaste. The food was bland, all but tasteless, and had the texture of mushroom.

"That is better," said their captor "I want the two of you to be healthy." She smiled warmly. "Now, tell me. What seek you in Janagar the Blessed?"

"As I said before." Conan told her, "we seek our friends."

"You lie!" she screeched, slashing him across the face with her whip. "No one ever came to Janagar seeking a friend!"

"Crom curse you, woman!" Conan shouted. "I tell you the truth! We came hither with companions who sought something in Janagar, but they disappeared in the desert and came here alone, on their own."

The woman smiled again. "That is better." She turned to Achilea. "And what was it your friends sought here?"

Achilea shrugged her broad shoulders. "They said it was treasure, abandoned in this city thousands of years ago. Now I am not so sure."

Omia laughed and clapped her hands, "Treasure! Indeed we have that, and in abundance! And we have much better than that!"

"What kind of place is this?" Achilea asked. "How can people live beneath the ground like ants, never seeing the sun?" She grimaced as the whip drew a scarlet stripe along her jawline.

"It is I who ask questions here, not you!" Omia's eyes started in near-demented fury. Then she underwent another of her mercurial mood changes and caressed with her fingertips the flesh she had marked. "You of all people must understand the evil of the sun." Again she made the mysterious gesture. "I can see the mark of it all over you. Long, long ago, we escaped that evil. You must stay down here with us now. You will be the better for it, if you prove worthy."

"What do you mean?" Achilea asked, then winced as the whip slashed along the other side of her jaw.

"You do not learn well, do you?" Omia stood. "Your oversized friend knows enough to keep his silence when he has to. Perhaps you are only what you appear a pair of brainless beasts." She favored them with her warm smile again. "But I do not agree with Abbadas. I think you are both quite beautiful."

She clapped her hands. "Guards!" Ten armed men and women came into the chamber. "Take them to the holding pens. Have them washed and secured."

Their chains were unlocked from the floor rings and they were taken out of the room. A woman led each by the chain like a dog on a leash. Sharp spears at their backs kept them tractable.

From long habit, Conan made an inventory of every weapon. He wanted to know exactly what to grab should the opportunity for a break present itself. Besides spears, some had swords and daggers. A few had short-handled axes. The axes had light, crescent-shaped blades and looked strangely familiar. Then the short sword worn by the woman who held his chain drew his attention. It was hooked so that its handle protruded just above her right hip, and the sheathed, twenty-inch blade slanted across her buttocks. By the distinctive shape of its handle, he knew it to be a Stygian weapon. As further proof, the sheath was decorated with Stygian hieroglyphics.

After a short walk along the main corridor, they came to a set of heavy doors flanked by guards. The doors were opened to reveal a low-ceilinged tunnel and they were prodded inside. The tunnel was completely undecorated and here the rough tool-marks indicated that all had been hewn from solid rock. Light was provided by more of the copper tubes, which produced flames only a little larger than those of candles. Fresh air hissed through grated openings near the floor.

They passed low doorways, and within the chambers, the Cimmerian could see persons of both sexes chained to the walls. Most of them had short-cropped hair. This is a place where they punish disobedient slaves," he said.

They were taken to a room where water gushed from a wall into a wide basin before exiting through a drain beneath an overflow spout. The air in the room had a heavy, humid, fecund smell. "In!" barked a guard. It was the first word they had heard *from* these warriors. Hands divested them of what little remained of their clothing. They stepped into the basin, and slaves with pitchers and brushes indicated that they should duck beneath the water.

"I would swear this is river water, by its smell," Conan announced before submerging himself.

"Stand," said a slave when they came up for air. They complied. Standing, the water came to mid-thigh. The slaves waded in and poured fragrant oil over their heads and bodies, men worked the oil into a lather with their brushes. Achilea clenched her teeth at the touch of the brushes on her sensitive skin.

"Easy, there," Conan said. "She's been burned."¹* The slave woman who was scrubbing down Achilea nodded and began to use a cloth instead of a brush. At least, he concluded, the slaves could understand them, even if they would not, or could not, speak.

Thoroughly cleansed, they stepped from the basin and were dried with rough towels, then prodded deeper into the prison. They passed a room where the three women, the dwarf and Kye-Dee were chained to the walls. At sight of their queen, the women and the dwarf lunged as close as their binds would allow and cried out their joy in seeing her alive. The Hyrkanian remained morose.

As Achilea spoke a few low words of encouragement, Conan could not forbear to smile. Stripped and cleaned even of their paint, the wild viragoes proved to be three rather handsome young women, although lacking the soft contours of their more civilized sisters.

Conan and Achilea were taken to a somewhat larger room, where their chains were fastened to rings on opposite walls. Then the guards released their bound wrists and filed out. Rubbing their wrists and flexing their fingers, the two examined their surroundings. A flame outside their doorway provided the only illumination. At the greatest extent of their chains, they were still separated by two paces.

Having exhausted the possibilities of exploration, they sat upon the cold stone floor.

"Conan, have we fallen among madmen?" Achilea asked.

"It is hard to say. The first time I visited a city, I thought the people diere were mad, because they were so different from the tribesmen and villagers of my youth. Certainly, living in this anthill would make anyone mad."

She tugged at her chains. "Never have I been bound before! I must get out of here!" Her voice betrayed the strain she had suppressed for so long.

"I have been chained up many times," he told her. "And it does no good to fight steel chains if you've no tools. Just be calm and resolve to wait it out. Be ever alert for any chance, any mistake by a guard. I have won my freedom uncounted times. Those who give way to despair, or who go mad with rage, are the ones who never escape."

"Truly?" she said, seeming to take encouragement from his words. "Then I will try to do as you say. It is hard, though. To be a queen, even one in exile, and then to be treated like this. It is harder on my pride man the sun was on my flesh."

"That's better," Conan said with a faint grin, "It does little harm to have your pride tempered in cold water from time to time."

"My queen!" called a voice Conan recognized as Payna's. "Can you hear me?"

"Aye!" she called back. She described their situation and relayed Conan's advice. As long as their queen was well, the women seemed to be satisfied,

"What do you think that vicious woman meant about our proving our worth?"

"I do not know," Conan said, amused to hear this fierce woman describe another woman as vicious. "But I've little doubt we'll learn all too soon. I am more interested in that water."

"It did smell like river water," she said, "not like water from a spring. How can there be river water in the middle of this awful desert?"

"It can be from only one place," he assured her. "Underground. This may have possibilities. And there is another thing: The guardswoman who led me on a leash wore on her belt a Stygian sword. It means that these people have some sort of contact with the outside world. I think their axes were Stygian as well."

"Perhaps the weapons are very old," she said.

"That may be, but the sheath that carried the sword is not old. It is made of leather, and is decorated with Stygian picture-writing."

She shrugged. "How does this help us? The woman said that sometimes heat-addled desert men find their way here and die. That may be how the sword got here."

"Maybe," Conan allowed. "But remember what I told you: Be on the lookout for every advantage. Every bit of knowledge we gain may help us get away from this place. There is a river here someplace, and through Stygia flows the greatest river in the world."

"If we get out of this dungeon," she said, "do you think you can find your way back to the surface?"

"Aye," he replied without hesitation. "I do not forget where my steps have taken me."

She nodded. "I, too, was raised in a land without signposts and with few landmarks, where the only way to stay alive was to have a strong sense of direction and location. But I have never been in a warren such as this. Here, there is no sun, no moon, no stars. There are no prevailing winds." He could tell that the catastrophic events of the past few days had sapped her iron self-confidence.

"It helps," Conan told her, "if you have spent much time in the dense forests of the Pictish Wilderness, or the jungles of the south. A city is another sort of jungle, even an underground city like this one."

"What do you make of these torches, that burn without smoke? Is this sorcery?"

"I've never seen the like of them," he admitted, "but somehow I do not feel that they are magical. As we were herded here, I saw a slave cleaning one, like a man cleaning an oil lamp. Perhaps they burn an invisible vapor. I have seen alchemists set such vapors afire in their laboratories, and everyone has seen me burning vapors that rush from *the* kilns of charcoal burners."

"Well," she said doubtfully, "so it may be. But still, I do not like it." She was silent for a while, then: "How long is it since we rose? There is no way to judge the time in this accursed netherworld."

"In this, I am in no better case than you," Conan said, yawning, "but I think we would each be the better for some sleep."

They both lay down and she said, "They were so careful to bathe us, you would think they would provide us with a little bedding."

He laughed. "I think the bath was for their convenience, not ours. They seem to be a cleanly folk. Beyond that, they've no interest in our comfort." He stretched, then put his hands behind his head as he stared at the ceiling. "I doubt the lack of bedding is the worst thing in store for us here."

His sleep was long and dreamless. He awoke to find Achilea examining her skin by the light of the strange torch. Lightly, she ran her fingertips over her arms and thighs, then over the rich contours of her torso.

"Is everything present and accounted for?" he asked.

She started slightly. "I thought you still asleep. Yes, all is here and better than I had hoped. That oil they used on us must have healing properties. My sunburn no longer pains me and most of the dead skin has peeled away. Even my lips are no longer cracked."

"That is good," he said, sitting up and rubbing at his eyes. "You don't want to be weak in any way when we break out. How are your eyes?"

"I see as well as ever, though I could use more light."

"Aye, you look well," he said, meaning it heartily. His unimpeded view took in every perfect inch of her, "If only these chains were longer."

She looked at him haughtily. "Just as well they are not, for then I would have to break your stiff Cimmerian neck."

"Getting your pride back, I see," he said sourly. Still, it seemed to him that there had been a teasing note in her voice.

A slave brought in a single large bowl of steaming liquid and a jug of water and set the vessels between them, then left. Conan took the jug and drank while Achilea raised the bowl to her mouth, then

made a face.

"More of the mushroom stuff," she said, passing the bowl to Conan and accepting the jug in return. "Have these people no proper meat?"

Conan took a mouthful of the bland gruel, thick with rubbery chunks of fungus. "It will keep us alive," he said. "And even people well provided with flesh never waste it on prisoners. Stale, moldy bread and hard cheese is your portion in prison. At least this is hot."

They finished their savorless meal and for a while, Achilea conversed with her followers. They seemed to need the sound of her voice.

"Do none of these other prisoners speak?" Conan asked.

"They'll not answer us," Jeyba said.

"They would have nothing to say, anyway," Kye-Dee added, "They are worthless people; slaves to people who are themselves but insects who live like termites in a rotten log."

"Still, they might be able to tell us something about our situation," Conan said. But so far, he had not heard the slaves speak a single word, even among themselves. He determined to look into the question.

Not long after they had eaten, guards came to conduct them once more to the bathing facility. When their next meal was brought, Conan seized the slave woman by the shoulders while Achilea looked on curiously.

"Speak to me, woman," Conan ordered. She said nothing, only stared at him with pale, frightened eyes. He took her lower jaw between thumb and forefinger and pried her mouth open. Then he released her.

"She is tongueless," he reported. "Perhaps all the slaves have been so treated."

Achilea snorted with disgust. "Civilized people call us barbarians because we are like beasts of prey. But it is a natural and a clean way to live. This is ugly and twisted."

"I'll give you no argument on that point," Conan said.

A few hours later, a team of guards arrived. Their hands were bound, and they were taken from their cell. In a room near the bath, they found Achilea's women and dwarf with Kye-Dee. Slaves dressed Conan in his wolfskin breechclout and studded belt, and Achilea in her fox pelt and leggings. Their desert robes were nowhere to be seen, but the Cimmerian noted with amusement that the returned garments had been scrupulously cleaned.

Payna went to her queen and said in a low voice, "Did the man seek to molest you?"

Achilea smiled. "He would have, but his chain was too short."

"Hah!" Conan said. "She stretched hers a good foot trying to get to me!"

"Silence!" barked a woman of the guard. Jeyba butted her unarmored belly with his head, and the breath went out of her with a *whoosh*. She fell on her backside, her spear clattering to the stone floor.

"Show respect to our queen, wench!" the dwarf shouted. Instantly, a half-score of spear-points were leveled at his throat.

"Easy, Jeyba," Conan said approvingly. "There is no sense in getting killed too soon." Spears at their backs, they left the dungeon.

Eleven

The procession entered a new part of the labyrinthine city. They discovered that not everything lay immediately adjacent to the main corridor, for there were many intersections and branchings. One flight of stairs took them to an area where the river smell was very strong. Here they passed through vast natural caverns where grotesquely overgrown mushrooms grew in obscene profusion. Some were like broad toadstools, some like branching coral; others hung from the ceiling in thin sheets, clusters, or twisted shapes like the horns of rams.

At one point, there were none of the vapor torches. These were not necessary because the fungi of that area glowed: with their own cold light: purple and red and a sickly green. The ghastly illumination made the humans look like walking corpses.

"Have you been keeping track of where we are, Conan?TM Achilea asked when they were past the mushroom caverns.

"Aye," he answered, "but I'd as lief discover a shortcut.¹

"Silence, there!" said a guard.

"Sit on your spear, dog," Conan said disgustedly. "Your queen, or whatever she is, wants us alive for something, so make no idle threats." Jeyba laughed to hear these words.

"She never said you were to be unhurt," said the woman Jeyba had butted. She jabbed the little man sharply in the buttock, eliciting a yelp. Now it was the guards' turn to laugh.

"At least they have a sense of humor," Kye-Dee said.

As they walked down a side corridor, they approached an entrance from whence drifted a sound that seemed utterly out of place in these surroundings: the sound of sawing. As they passed the portal, Conan slowed and peered in. With long, two-man saws, a team of slaves was engaged in reducing dark, heavy logs to squared timbers and planks. The air was redolent of the pleasant smell of sap and sawdust.

"Mushrooms they can grow without sunlight," Achilea commented as they passed on. "But trees? How do they— A guard jabbed her on the spine, drawing blood.

"Enough!" Conan snarled. With bewildering speed, he kicked the man's feet from beneath him, the movement made not at all less effective by the chain connecting the Cimmerian's leg-irons. A short kick to the man's belly effectively paralyzed him before Conan's heavy foot trod upon his neck. As cartilage began to give way, Conan stopped. The chief of the guards had drawn his sword and now held it beneath the dwarf's chin.

"Kill him and this one dies," the man said. "The queen is interested only in the big woman and you, black-haired one. One more incident from either of you, and the little man dies. After him, that one." He jerked his head toward Kye-Dee. "After him, the three smaller women, one after another. Do you understand me?"

"Aye," Conan said, removing his foot. The man gasped and gargled as he rolled to his side and curled himself into a ball, "Just recall that I am a patient man, but even my patience has its limits."

They said no more, but the way Achilea smiled at him put Conan in a better mood for the rest of their trek. This ended in a vast natural cavern that was almost circular in shape. Its floor had been hewn into multiple rows of seats surrounding a low, oval pit. The seats were richly covered with silken cushions. Overhead, the greatest chandelier they had yet seen provided light from hundreds of vapor jets. The place was deserted.

They were marched to a rectangular cage overlooking the pit. It had a single bench and was enclosed by bars of iron. With leveled spears at their back, they entered and the chief guard locked the swinging gate behind them.

"What is this, my queen?" Payna asked.

"Have you never seen a fighting pit?" Conan said.

"I have," said Achilea, "in some towns and villages and fair-sites. But those were rough enclosures of earth and timber. What sort of people would build a pit that is so large and permanent?"

"People who are fond of blood," he answered her. "People who would rather watch others fight than do it themselves."

It seemed that they had a wait in store for them. "Wood, leather, cloth," Conan mused. "These things have to come from the surface, and I'll wager they were not brought across the desert. Those were fresh logs the slaves were cutting, full of sap."

"You've nothing to wager with," Achilea answered, "but agree with you anyway."

"Leather may be made from human skin," Kye-Dee said. "In my tribe, we made our war drums from the skins of our enemies."

"Silk is made by spiders," said Jeyba, "and spiders live in dark, sunless places. Perhaps they weave cloth from spider silk."

"That still leaves those logs," Conan said remorselessly.

"These people are powerful magicians," Kye-Dee said. "Perhaps they produce logs with their magickal arts."

Conan could not agree. So far, he had seen virtually nothing of the sorcerous about these strange people. On the contrary, they seemed to be as prosaic as ants. It was only the place they chose to live in that was truly bizarre.

Further conversation was cut off when people began to file into the huge cavern through numerous entrances. They descended the aisles that divided the seats into wedge-shaped sections and seated themselves upon the cushions. Conan noted that they were strictly regulated, for the people in each separate wedge wore a single, distinctive garb that was different from that distinguishing those in the neighboring wedges. Here, he saw men in papery shoulder capes and shaven heads; there, a group of women who wore serpent masks. Yet another wedge was occupied by men and women, but all these wore masks covering the left side of the face only, and they carried long, crystal-tipped wands. Whether these insignia identified them by rank, status or occupation, he could not guess.

All stood when Omia entered, closely followed by Abbadas, who still wore the weapons and armor he'd borne when Conan's party was captured. Behind Abbadas was a small, hairless man who wore a simple, floor-length cape of silk. His features were oddly familiar.

"Who is that man behind Abbadas?" Achilea asked. "He looks like one of them, yet it seems to me that I know him."

"You do," said Conan with grim satisfaction. "Darken his skin with a bit of paint, give him a false beard and swathe him in desert robes, and you have our old friend, Amram."

"Amram!" she said. "He is one of them?"

Conan shook his head. "I think not. His Kothian accent was too convincing, and so was much of his story. He has been down here a long time, though; long enough to take on their look."

Indeed, the man they knew as Amram was almost as pale as the underground inhabitants. But his eyes were brown, and the faint stubble that showed on his shaven pate was dark as well. The Cimmerian guessed that the man had shorn his scalp in order to blend with the populace, for those who had hair in this place were *as* white-tressed as albinos. Amram was a man who survived in a hard world with the chameleon's talent for blending with its surroundings.

"Who next?" Achilea mused. "The twins, perhaps?"

But it seemed that the mysterious pair were not to make an appearance. There was a small platform next to the cave and just above the arena. Here Omia and Abbadas took their seats on heavily cushioned chairs. Amram stood behind them and a small crowd of slaves attended them. As they arranged themselves, a file of slaves standing above the tiers of seats began to play music on instruments of wood, string and metal. It was a harsh music, with much metallic clashing and shrill trilling. A group of young, comely slave women entered the pit and went through an intricate dance that featured much athletic leaping, contortion and other gymnastic feats.

"Perhaps this will not be so bad," Kye-Dee said, smiling nervously.

"I'll believe that when all this is over," Conan answered. He looked at Omia. "Why are we here?"

The mad light came into her eyes. "I told you that you ask no questions."

He jerked his head toward the arena below. "From the look of this place, I've cursed little to lose by asking questions."

Abbadas smirked and Omia looked furious, but Amram bent low and spoke in her ear. "My queen and my mistress, this great rogue is insolent, but is not his capacity for defiance among the very reasons you wanted him here?"

She subsided into her cushions. "Yes, so it was. I do hope he will not disappoint us."

"Shall we begin with him?" Abbadas asked.

"No. He and the tawny woman are the best of the lot." She looked over her captives with lazy maliciousness. "These two—" she indicated Kye-Dee and Jeyba "—look like inferior stock to me. Let

them go first"

"What?" Conan shouted. "This band stands together!"

"You defy me again!" Omia's voice went up shockingly and her pale eyes burned. "You are no band! You are all my slaves, to do with as I please, individually or together! Guards, separate him from the others and secure him."

Pole-arms were thrust through the bars, crowding the Cimmerian back into a corner, where his neck ring was fastened to a corner bar. When the weapons were withdrawn, he could move no more than a pace in any direction. He cursed with frustrated rage, but to no avail.

The gate swung open. "You two come out," the guard chief said, pointing to the dwarf and the Hyrkanian.

"Jeyba!" Achilea said, grasping the little man's shoulder, "•<!__"

"Would you be chained up as well, my beautiful slave-queen?" Omia said imperiously.

The dwarf patted his queen's hand. "Best I go. Avenge me if you may, but above all, get away from this place alive," His voice was pitched low, so that only his companions in the cage could hear him. He quirked his eyebrows toward the Cimmerian. "Stick to this one, if possible," he bade Achilea. "If anyone can get you away from here, it is he." With these words, the dwarf exited the cage.

Kye-Dee was not to be outdone in stem acceptance of fate. "Hah!" he cried, laughing in derision. "I will show these despicable worms that a Hyrkanian warrior of the Turtle Clan is better than other men! I want only arms. Then bring on your warriors, your beasts and your demons!"

"Oh, you shall have arms," Abbadas said. "You would provide precious little entertainment otherwise."

Omia clapped her hands twice and the music ceased. The dancers ended their performance in mid-note and filed out of the pit through the same portal they had entered: a grated nth on the side opposite Omia's platform. When the last was through, the metal grate was lowered behind them.

A short flight of steps next to the cage took Kye-Dee and

Jeyba to arena level, where a bolted door allowed access. The bolts were withdrawn and the two men were pushed through. A guard went out with them and removed their bonds. Then the guard left the pit and the door was rebelled.

A slave woman entered the arena bearing weapons. These she handed to the two men: for Jeyba, his metal-studded bludgeon and a short-handled ax; for Kye-Dee, his saber with its keen, curved, arm-length blade. The Hyrkanian flourished the blade spiritedly, drawing glittering arcs and patterns in the air.

"This is a fine weapon and I am good with it," he announced, "but where is my bow?"

"Do you think that we would allow you a weapon you could kill us with?" said Omia with a laugh.

"No," Kye-Dee admitted, "but it was worth a try."

The dwarf said nothing, standing as steady as a tree-stump on his short, bowed legs, his club gripped in his right hand and his *ax* in his left. He was a coiled knot of steel-spring muscles, ready for anything.

"Begin!" Abbadas said.

The grated door that had admitted the dancers opened. Conan studied the four warriors who entered. They were slaves, ~as evinced by their short-cropped hair, but they were somewhat larger and far better built than any he had seen so far. He concluded that they were special slaves or condemned citizens, trained to fight for the amusement of their betters. They wore oddments of armor on their arms and legs, no two of them armored in quite the same fashion, and gorgets of black steel protecting their throats. None wore helmet or body armor. Each carried a small shield of steel a foot in diameter in his left hand. The right hand of each gripped a short, straight, double-edged sword.

"Four against two!" Achilea spat. "This is not sporting!"

" 'Sporting'?" said Abbadas languidly. "I am unfamiliar with the word."

"That I doubt not," Conan said. "At least let them fight one against one, in sequence."

"Wherefore?" Omia asked. "These two are to be killed and we wish to be amused. Your wishes and theirs are of no account." She turned to the crowd of citizens and stood. They rose likewise.

"People of holy Janagar!" she cried. "In an age long past, our gods preserved us from the evil of the sun and taught us how true humans should live!" By the way she chanted her words, Conan guessed that she recited an ancient formula. "Once again we offer thanks for our salvation according to the custom of our ancestors: with blood. This time—" and here her voice departed from its hieratic, ritual phrasing—"we offer not only blood of our own, but that of dwellers beneath the sun. Cursed be the sun!"

"Cursed be the sun!" shouted the crowd of spectators in loud unison.

"A few days ago, I might have joined them in that curse," Achilea said. "Now I would be burned all over again just for a glimpse of it."

Omia resumed her seat and so did the audience. "Begin!" Omia cried.

Achilea and her women gripped the bars of the cage, pressing their faces against the cold iron, their eyes fixed upon the scene of the unfolding drama. Conan, chained to the corner bar, still had a clear view. His face was as immobile as stone, but his heart seethed with hatred and rage.

The four fighting staves spread into a curving line and sought to take the two men from front and flank. The dwarf and the Hyrkanian stood shoulder to shoulder, but their eyes grew wary as the line spread.

"Back to back?" Kye-Dee suggested.

"That were best," the dwarf rumbled. "Just leave me room."

So they stood, crouched, separated by a pace while their enemies circled, looking for an opening. Two darted in upon

Jeyba, one from each side. The one on the right jabbed his sword at the dwarf's face, but Jeyba ducked low and swung his club backhand at the man's knee. The slave managed to interpose his shield, but the steel rang like a gong and crumpled inward. The attacker sprang backward grimacing, his left arm half paralyzed from the shock.

At the same time, the slave on the left came in, stooping low to skewer the dwarf. Thinking that the little man was fully occupied with his other opponent, the slave failed to guard himself properly. The thick blade of the ax came straight up and split his jaw from chin to nose even as his weapon, aimed at Jeyba's throat, scored instead a shallow wound upon the dwarf's shoulder.

Achilea and the women growled approval while Kye-Dee held his opponents at bay with his longer sword, menacing them with bewildering circles and figure-eights. Conan knew that he could not keep up these tactics for long, for his arm must tire soon. He knew the Hyrkanians to be superb warriors on horseback, but far less effective on foot. Kye-Dee appeared to be better than most of his countrymen with * sword.

"Ha!" the Hyrkanian shouted, making a lunge toward the slave on his right. The one on the left plunged into the opening, but the lunge was a feint and Kye-Dee pulled back, slashing at the attacker. The slave raised his shield but succeeded only in deflecting the blade into his face. Even as the man fell back screaming, the other darted in, shield high, and plunged his short sword into the Hyrkanian's side. The point struck ribs and was turned, but the wound was bloody and serious, Kye-Dee rammed his elbow into the man's face, then brought his sword across to sever the tendons and arteries in the man's neck. The slave staggered back, fountaining blood that his split windpipe churned into an ugly froth.

A low, snarling sound came from the crowd as the brief, violent exchange passed and the fight entered a new phase. Achilea and her women shouted encouragement. Now the odds were even, and all four fighters still standing were wounded.

The dwarf's remaining opponent was first to renew the attack. The blow he had absorbed did no more than slow his shield-arm, while Jeyba's cut was painful and weakening, for it bled freely and the muscle of his shoulder was damaged.

Jeyba fended the attacking sword aside with his club and swung his ax at the slave's neck, but his

injury slowed him and the other was able to avoid the weapon. Still, the dwarf pressed the attack, swinging short forehand and backhand blows of the club at the slave's unhelmeted head. The slave fended them with his shield, but each blow further injured his left arm and he grimaced with pain. An underhand thrust of his sword cut deeply into Jeyba's chest, but even as it connected, the ax came across and smashed into his pelvis. Both men collapsed while the crowd growled and snarled.

While Jeyba was thus engaged, Kye-Dee was attacking. He had been wounded far worse than the dwarf and knew it. He had to end this fight swiftly, before he weakened. With a high-pitched Hyrkanian battle cry, he leapt upon his opponent, raining sword-strokes. The man fell back, covered with blood from the wound that had removed half of one ear, stripped flesh from his cheek and divided his nose.

Kye-Dee swung a low, horizontal cut. Instead of blocking with his shield, the slave sucked in his belly, allowing the blade to pass a finger's width from his flesh, and darted in to take advantage of the follow-through. He punched his shield at the Hyrkanian's face and thrust with his sword. With his free hand, Kye-Dee managed to deflect the sword from his heart, but it caught him just beneath the collarbone even as the rim of the shield connected with his jaw.

The Hyrkanian managed to push himself away from his opponent, shaking his head to clear the stars from before his eyes. The slave thought him done for and rushed in to finish him, but Kye-Dee brought his sword across and low, cutting the man's leading leg from under him, almost severing the limb. The slave fell and the next stroke of the sword passed across his neck.

Jeyba lurched to his feet and placed a foot against his last opponent's jaw as he levered his ax free of the man's skull. Then both men were standing, grinning in triumph. Jeyba raised his bloodied weapons in salute to his queen while Kye-Dee sang a wild Hyrkanian victory song. They were both badly wounded and perhaps dying, but for the moment, they stood victorious amid their fallen enemies and they feared nothing.

There, you degenerate dogs!" Conan shouted. "You see the sort of men who are raised beneath the sun!"

"Yes," said Omia. "I am satisfied on that count."

"Give them a more interesting opponent!" Abbadas urged, his voice thick with bloodlust.

"No, these two are finished," she said. "Kill them."

Instantly, armed figures dashed into the pit. These were not fighting slaves, but masked guards. There were at least a score of them, and they encircled the two bloody men, their weapons leveled. Then they advanced. Jeyba and Kye-Dee fought with all their waning strength, but their valor was futile. The length of their attackers' weapons made it impossible to reach them and their numbers were overwhelming. They died cursing their enemies through their own blood.

Achilea stared bleakly at the bloody pit as the corpses were cleared away and slaves came out to mop up. Framing her face, the heavy knuckles of her swordsman's hands went dead white as they gripped the bars. Her three women managed to embrace her simultaneously.

"He was just a man, after all, my queen," Payna said, clearly meaning the dwarf. Hyrkanians meant less than nothing to the Amazons.

"It was not to die like this that I saved him," she said, her voice toneless. She tore her eyes away from the pit and stared at Conan. "Cimmerian, how can you look upon this unmoved? They were your friends."

"They were great fighting-men and they died on their feet, as men should," he said stonily. "Among my people, there is no higher praise for any man. I salute them and I will avenge them."

Their voices were low and they were not heard upon the podium. Omia and Abbadas were looking over their prisoners with speculating eyes.

"Who next, think you?" Omia said.

"The three smaller women might make a fine show," said Abbadas. "Match them against a few trained women fighting-slaves. After the last show, I think we should up the odds. Give each of them three to fight."

"It is tempting ..." Omia stroked her chin, as if pondering deeply. "... but that would be twelve in the arena at once. It would be awfully crowded, and difficult to make out the details of any one combat. Of course, we could bring them out one at a time—"

"No!" Achilea shouted. "It is I who interest you, not they! Send me out there and then bring out your fighting-slaves, if you would see some killing!"

Omia smiled. "True, it is the big woman and the even bigger man who intrigue me most. Do you think they would provide us with diverting entertainment?"

Abbadas nodded. "Aye. As for these other three," he raked them with eyes that burned through his mask, "I may have other uses for them."

"Guards," Omia said, "take that woman—" she pointed toward Achilea, then swung her arm toward Conan—"and that man to the arena. Take care. They've yet to be domesticated."

This time, the guards used special caution. With their spears, they backed the three weeping, protesting women into a corner of the cage. Then they conducted Achilea to the arena. She turned as if to say something to her women, hesitated, then walked out with her head high.

When Achilea was in the pit, the guards returned for Conan. His neck ring was unlocked and he was prodded from his place. As he walked past the three women, Lombi hissed at him.

"Cimmerian! Do not let our queen die, or we shall slay you more horribly than these depraved weaklings could dream to!" A combination of fear, rage and hatred glittered in three pairs of eyes.

Conan smiled grimly. "I've yet to tremble at the sound of a woman's voice, but you three could almost accomplish the feat I swear to you mis: If your queen does not come out of that pit alive, neither shall I. This is my oath upon the name of Crom, god of my people."

The three nodded sternly, their anger still fierce in their eyes. He walked past them to the steps and descended to arena level with the weapons of watchful guards poised inches from his body. The door was unbolted and he stepped through. Achilea watched him with a faint, mocking smile as their bonds were removed, but as the guards left the arena, she spoke to him in a voice pitched too low for any but he to hear her words.

"Do not look too quickly, but high above the seats, on the wall opposite our hosts, I think I saw something. Look and tell me what you see."

Mystified, the Cimmerian did as she bade. He rubbed his wrists and flexed his limbs as if working the stiffness from muscles long cramped. In truth, he was as ready for action as ever in his life, but it never did harm to sow deception before enemies. He worked his head around as if to relieve a stiff neck, and as he did, he glanced in the direction she indicated.

The wall above the tiers of seats was indented with scores of niches, and in each niche was a statue, though whether of humans, gods or demons, he could not guess. Then he saw it: In the highest tier, directly opposite the podium where Omia and Abbadas took their ease, something glowed faintly purple. Straining his eyes but trying not to stare, he just made out a tiny, manlike form crouching by the painted sculpture of an incredibly voluptuous, nude woman.

"Our little friend from the desert," he said. "Our stalkers remain persistent."

"I wish that I knew what it means," she said.

"Just now we've more immediate cares," he said. "Such as how to get out of this cursed pit alive, and who we have to slay to do it."

This time, two slave women entered the arena. Each carried a weapon-belt bearing sword and dagger. Conan took his gratefully, feeling much restored to have its familiar weight settled about his lean hips. Achilea looked equally pleased to buckle her belt around her own rather more generous endowments. Then she stepped to the edge of the pit and picked something up from the floor: Jeyba's ax, dropped there and forgotten. She tucked its short haft beneath her belt.

"Jeyba could easily have slain that woman," she said. "These people seem not to realize that an ax may be thrown. But he did not, just so that I might have a better chance."

"He was a good man," Conan averred. "In those final moments, the urge to avenge himself must

have raged powerfully within him."

"We shall not waste his courage," she vowed. "But if I am wounded mortally, I shall split her arrogant, masked face with this ere I release my last breath."

"Do so," Conan said. "I'll skewer her partner, Abbadas, with my dagger." He touched the hilt of the heavy weapon. "I can throw it accurately with either hand."

"Good," she said, smiling broadly. "We'll not die in vain, men." The Cimmerian smiled back at her.

"You two seem pleased with yourselves, considering your circumstances," Omia taunted. "Let us see whether you are as happy with your opponents."

"Bring them on," said Conan, flexing his fingers. "I bore easily." Omia clapped twice and the two waited tensely as the grate opposite them was raised.

"I doubt not there'll be many of them, since our friends did far four," Conan whispered. "But they must all come through that door. They can manage no more than double file. As soon as the first is through the door, we attack. I'll take the file on the left, you take that on the right. Time it right, and we'll face just one at a time."

"A good plan," she acknowledged. "Though I fear our hosts will be disappointed."

"I can live with the shame." Conan said with a hard grin. Then a sound came from beyond the gate and they drew their swords. They stood at easy guard, poised on toe balls of their feet the pose of swordsmen who are ready for anything.

But the first thing through the gate was not a living opponent. Instead, there came a wave of the humid, fecund river smell. Then a great rush of water gushed through the portal. It was not the crystal water of a spring, but a faintly greenish-brown fluid in which particles of soil, algae and plant debris were suspended.

"What is this?" Achilea gasped as the cool water lapped over her ankles and began to soak her fur leggings. "Do they intend to drown us?"

"They've more imagination than that," Conan said. "Be ready!"

They kept their eyes fixed upon the gate as the level of the water rose to their knees, then to their waists. When the surface was just above their midsections, the flow stopped and the agitated water sloshed and lapped at the sides of the pit. They ignored the bloodthirsty mutter of the crowd and the encouraging cries and prayers of the wild women.

"Something comes!" Achilea said.

"Back up!" Conan ordered. "Let's have some room."

Awkwardly, fighting the resistance of the water, they began to back step by cautious step toward the podium. They had managed no more than five paces when something sinuous glided through the portal. Its scaly back—bearing rows of greenish-black spines—cut the surface of the water as a long, powerful tail propelled it at terrible speed for so huge a beast.

Behind a long snout, a pair of slit-pupiled amber eyes gleamed with ancient malice.

"What is it?" Achilea gasped. "A dragon?"

"Nay," Conan replied. "A Styx crocodile. 'Ware the jaws and 'ware the tail! Go for its belly!" Then the thing was upon them.

The monster was at least thirty feet long and as it attacked, it was impressible to tell from its fixed gaze which of them it had selected for its first target but the two stood a couple of paces distant to give themselves sword-room, and Conan knew that it had to go for one or the other. Its tiny, reptilian brain lacked the capacity for a combined attack. Five feet from them, its head went beneath the water and it began to roll sideways and open its jaws. It had picked the woman.

With his sword gripped in both hands, Conan hewed at the thing's neck just behind the jaws as the side of its head came momentarily above the surface. He plowed a deep gouge and blood gushed forth, but the incredibly tough hide and the back edge of the jawbone saved it from a potentially fatal wound. Even so, the unexpected impact jarred it from its intended path, and the terrible jaws snapped shut on

water instead of on Achilea's thigh.

The Amazon queen hewed with all her strength at her only target: the thing's back. The impact jarred her to her spine and succeeded only in malting a shallow furrow in the thick, scaly hide. The crocodile might not have felt the blow. A twisting wrench of its supple body knocked her over as it sought to bring its formidable natural weaponry to bear against the Cimmerian.

She came up, sputtering water, just in time to see Conan hacking at it. It had twisted around with unbelievable speed and was coming for him as straight as a war-galley on a ramming course. Not giving it time to dive and turn, the Cimmerian lurched forward and brought his edge straight down upon the target most exposed to him; the stretch of skull between the bulbous, staring eyes. Its minute brain was in there somewhere, and he hoped to cleave through its shield of bone and split it asunder.

The blade failed to bite all the way through the bone, but the shock momentarily paralyzed the creature and prevented its jaws from opening. Instead, the blunt snout caught Conan in the belly and drove him against the wall of the arena just below the podium. The breath went out of him and he went under, dropping his sword. The scaly muzzle pinned him to the bottom, grinding from side to side. Then he felt the jaws begin to open as the beast's paralysis waned. Desperately, Conan wrapped his long, powerful arms around the huge muzzle, holding the toothy mouth shut.

With a surge of coiled muscle, the great reptile whipped upward, lifting Conan entirely free of the surface. He took advantage of the respite to draw in a great lungful of air. The stubby forelegs began to scrabble at him, their six-inch claws able to gut him at a stroke if he permitted it. With desperate haste, he wrapped his own legs around its body just behind the forelegs, so that the appendages could only scrape weakly at his flanks. He wondered where Achilea was. For all he knew, she was unconscious and drowning.

In truth, she was striving with all her might to find a vulnerable target on the thrashing beast, while at the same time, avoiding the flailing tail: a dozen feet of armored, saw-edged muscle that could snap a human spine and cut the body half in twain as easily as a man swatting a fly. She had learned well the futility of hewing at its back, but she could see that the Cimmerian was in the most perilous of straits, wrapped around the thing's head and immobilizing its terrible jaws.

The muscles that close a crocodile's jaws are tremendously powerful; those that open them are far weaker. Thus Conan found that he could hold the animal's jaws shut with one arm, while with the hand thus freed, he could snatch forth his dagger. This he did and drove the blade at the glaring, split-pupiled eye, but the monster's thrashing deflected his aim and his point dug instead into the shelf of bone below the amber orb. There it wedged so tightly that the Cimmerian had to tug mightily, striving to free it.

Once again the crocodile plunged beneath the water. Seeking to dislodge its unwelcome rider, it began to twist sinuously, rolling over and over like a huge, scaly log. Conan knew that this had to end soon. He never surfaced long enough for a decent breath, and should the beast go deep enough to strike the bottom, or brush against the wall of the pit, it would scrape him off or crush him.

Achilea hacked at the crocodile wherever she saw an opportunity. She remembered what Conan had said about its belly, and when the monster began to roil, she tried to work her way close enough to get her sword into it. But the creature's movements were so rapid that she saw only the pale undersurface flash by too swiftly for a cut. Then it seemed to tire and slow fractionally, and she prepared herself for a single, perfectly precise blow, knowing there would be no chance for another. With her hilt gripped in both hands, she raised the weapon overhead like a giant dagger.

Once again the pale belly of the crocodile came up. Achilea's point plunged down as she lunged forward with her whole weight behind the blow. The blade sank in just below Conan's encircling leg and went in deep. Then she was dragged over by the creature's overwhelming momentum, but she did not relinquish her weapon as she was pulled along. She wrapped her own legs around the scaly body for purchase and began to drag the keen blade along the length of the corrugated belly, opening a tremendous gash. Blood and viscera began to choke her along with the water she was unable to avoid inhaling.

Finally, Conan got his dagger-point free. He felt the beast's motion begin to change, but he could not see the cause of it, nor had he the leisure to look. The next time he came to the surface, his arm reached far back, its fist tipped with steel. Then it shot down with the force of a meteor. The diamond point drove into the soft eye, through the bone behind and deep into the skull, piercing the primitive, savage brain.

The crocodile convulsed and reared, its full length thrashing through the water, shaking off its unwanted riders in its frantic death throes. Conan hit the surface with a mighty splash and immediately dove to the bottom to retrieve his lost sword. Achilea had kept her grip firm to her hilt even in the wildest of the dying monster's exertions, and moments later, the two stood side by side with their weapons firmly gripped, watching as the reptile's stubborn life-force slowly and reluctantly left its massive body. Its jaws gnashed, its legs thrashed and its body twisted, ever more slowly, entrails pouring from its rent belly long after it was dead. Finally, it was still, the only remainder of its departed life the lazy, back-and-forth motion of its tail.

Conan and Achilea grinned at one another in triumph. To his great surprise, she took a hand off her sword long enough to throw an arm around his neck and kiss him soundly on the lips. Then she drew back and was on guard once more.

"That was for a splendid feat," she told him.

"By Crom, woman!" he said. "I am glad that not all women's favors cost as dear as yours!"

She laughed almost gaily. "I am not like other women. What next, do you think?"

"Just so it is not those things I met in the sandstorm," he said fervently. Amazingly, the two of them had suffered no worse than a few bad scrapes and gouges from the crocodile's claws and the sharp scales of its back. "One thing I know well, though: That thing did not walk here across the desert. There is an underground river somewhere near, and I intend to find it."

"First things first," she reminded him. "We are still in the pit-Conan looked up to the podium and to his surprise, he saw Omia and Abbadas conversing amicably. From what he could see of their faces beneath their masks, they were smiling broadly, flashing teeth with every word they exchanged. The man broke off and went to the cage, where he began to look Achilea's women over with the air of a livestock buyer.

"Have we provided you with entertainment?" Conan demanded.

"Oh, yes!" Omia said. "You are both even better than we had hoped!"

"Then who or what do we fight next?" he asked. "Now I am wanned up and ready for a real combat!" Achilea laughed and tossed her wet hair defiantly.

"Oh, no!" Omia said. "We'll not risk you again. We have far better use for such specimens as you. And for these three as well." She gestured to the wild women. Abbadas was still speaking with them, and their eyes held a terror that was not the fear of death or of pain.

"What do you mean, damn you?" Conan demanded. There was another rushing sound and the water level began to lower. The dead crocodile was drifting toward the gate with the flow of the outrushing water,

"All in good time," she said. "Guards! When the arena is drained, disarm them, bind them and return them to their cells. But take them by the baths first. They are both in bad need of a washing." She laughed merrily, stood and went to join her colleague at the cage, where she, too, examined the three women.

Minutes later, the water was gone from the pit and the guards filed in. Quickly they encircled the tired combatants with leveled spears. Lacking any viable choice, the warriors, Cimmerian and Amazon, let their weapons drop to the arena floor.

Twelve

This time, there had been a physician attending men at the baths. The man, who had worn a long gown and a featureless, ghostlike mask, had directed two slaves to treat their minor wounds expertly. Then they had been led to long tables where they were massaged and rubbed with scented oil. Even in this process, their wrists and ankles had been secured to rings set into the corners of the tables.

Now they sat in their cell, awaiting their disposition.

"They have taken especial care of us this time," Achilea said, noting with distrust the thin pallets that had been added to their accommodations.

"Somehow I do not think it is because they have come to love us," said the Cimmerian, rattling his chains. "But I've no complaint about their healing ointment." Already the claw-gouges on his flanks were fading and the sting of them was wholly gone. He worked his arms and shoulders and felt no trace of lingering soreness. "These people are heaters beyond compare."

"That may be the only reason such degenerate weaklings can live at all," she said with a curl of her lip. From nearby came a noise of sobbing wails.

"Your women are not usually so sensitive," Conan noted. "What ails them?"

"Payna! Ekun! Lombi!" Achilea called. "What is the matter?"

"My queen!" Payna wailed. "Did the ant-people not tell you what they intend for us?"

"Do they intend to eat us?" Conan demanded. "I can well imagine that they'd fancy a change of diet after all these mushrooms."

"My queen!" said Lombi, ignoring him. "They intend to *breed* with us! That man, Abbadas, told us that he intends to father our first batch of whelps personally! We only expected torture!"

"And they want you to be the prize mare!" Ekun added. "The big Cimmerian will be put out to stud!"

"It makes sense," said Conan, unperturbed. "We've all seen how degenerate they've grown down here underground for untold generations. Prize breeding stock such as we cannot have come their way often."

"*You* can be calm about it!" Achilea barked. "Such activity is probably just what you indulge in between wars, anyway! It is different for us! We come from a nation of women."

"Do not speak foolishly," Conan chided. "Your tribe propagates itself like any other, not by means of sorcery. Else it would have died out long ago."

"Yes," she said, "but only once each year, with the proper ceremonies and only with men of our own choosing."

"It sounds like a dull existence, to my way of thinking."

"You would think so, you half-animal ..."

They were spared further argument when guards appeared at the entrance to their cell. Someone ducked through the low doorway.

"Greetings, my splendid prizes." It was Abbadas, his eyes burning inside the holes in his mask as his look devoured Achilea.

"You'll not breed your spawn with me, insect!" she spat. "I can kill you with one hand!"

He stroked her cheek gently. "Do not speak hastily. You know that we are very adept with chains and shackles. I can easily keep you tractable and harmless." A horrified look came over her face, and Conan was measuring the distance for a mighty kick when Abbadas amended, "But you must wait. For now, ray queen wishes to interview this one." He gestured toward the Cimmerian.

"The day you touch me is the day of your death," Achilea said, ignoring the fact that he had just touched her. Her meaning was clear enough.

Abbadas only laughed and called in the guards. "Take the man. You know enough by now to use all precautions with him." After issuing this order, he ducked back through the doorway.

Once again the Cimmerian was thoroughly trussed and led away. Achilea glared at him wordlessly and he smiled back at her, but he was not as lighthearted as he pretended. He, too, detested being treated like a prize ox, or even more fittingly, as a prize bull. A free warrior chose his own pleasures. On the other hand, there was no denying that he was not free. And was it his fault that this accursed woman had such excellent taste in men?

The guards escorted him by a route that was partly familiar to him and partly new. Gradually he was

building up a knowledge of the strange, underground city's plan. He felt sure that he could make his way through it tolerably well now. What he needed desperately to know was: Where was the river?

In Omia's chambers, he was taken to a room with a tentlike ceiling of silk, its walls lined with silk hangings elaborately embroidered in the artistic designs that were everywhere to be seen in the dual city, both below and above ground. The floor was covered with silken carpets and cushions.

Omia entered, masked and wearing a silken wrap, "Leave him," she ordered the guards. "First, remove his bonds."

"But, Majesty—" the guard captain began to protest.

"He'll not harm me," she assured them. "His friends are still under lock, he does not know the city, only the desert awaits above. I think he knows better than to attempt anything rash."

Reluctantly, the guards unfettered their hulking prisoner. That task accomplished, they bowed and departed.

"You are mad," Conan remarked, rubbing his wrists. "What makes you think the others are so precious to me that I value them above my freedom?"

"The way you all behave together," she said, perfectly at ease. "The three smaller women are clearly attached to the big one, and in the arena today, the two of you were guarding each other *as if* you shared the same heart"

"That is the way warriors stand by one another," he insisted.

"No," she said, smiling lazily. "That is how the dwarf and the taller man fought. With you and the woman, it was different." She clapped her hands and a slave girl came in bearing a tray. On it stood two goblets beaded with condensation. Omia took both and the girl withdrew. "Drink with me," she said, handing Conan a goblet.

He took it and drank without hesitation. Over its rim, he studied her. Her mask was made of a sheer material, more like a veil. Through it he could see that her face was fine-boned and beautiful. Her wrap was made of a similar material, concealing little. The wine was tartly sweet, and he was sure that it never came from a mushroom.

She went to a large cushion and sank upon it, reclining on her side, supported by an elbow. Nodding to another cushion next to her, she said, "Join me."

The Cimmerian took his ease as bidden, eager to gain knowledge from her. At another time, he would have been attracted to her delectable body, but just now he was interested in only one woman.

"Doubtless you are curious about fabled Janagar," she said as if reading his mind.

"Aye, that is so," he agreed. "We were brought hither by folk who had only the gleanings of ancient, musty books to guide them. As we drew nearer, we heard some vague tales handed down through many generations of storytellers. These hinted of a city of great wealth, and of even greater evil, that was struck down and abandoned. Our employers thought to find the city still intact, with its treasures in place." At this point, he saw no reason why he should not be perfectly honest with her. Any lingering loyalty he might have felt toward the twins had vanished, along with the twins themselves on the night of the sandstorm.

"How did they happen to bring along such ... unusual warriors?" Omia inquired.

"The workings of chance. We all met in a wretched mountain village where the rogues of three or four nations waited out hard times. The twins gave us a bit of the tale, suggesting that there might be great riches for us in the adventure. They said there were others looking for the city and therefore they needed protection. As you have seen with your own eyes, they hired the best."

At this she laughed. "You are not modest."

He shrugged. "Where is the need for modesty?"

"To be sure. Very well, that is how you came to cross the trackless desert hither. How did you happen to lose your employers?"

He frowned, "That you must know well. They arrived in the great temple above before we did."

"Of course I know!" she snapped, over-hastily. "I only wished to see whether you would prevaricate, but you seem to be an honest warrior as well as a large and handsome one. What else did you hear of Janagar?" The change of subject was awkward, betraying her uneasiness. She was steering him away from the subject of the twins. Why?

"An old man of the desert spun me an ancient lay of the sinful city that angered the gods and was therefore laid under their curse. He said that Janagar had been sited in the midst of fertile lands, but those green hills and valleys were blasted to sandy desert by the vengeful gods."

"And did he say what was the nature of Janagar's offense?" she asked

"The one it seems to me lies always at the heart of such tales: The folk of Janagar sought to raise themselves to the level of the gods by seizing the secret of immortality, wherefore the gods grew jealous."

At this she smiled "So you are skeptical of old tales? I would not have thought you so sophisticated"

"I believe the legends of my own people," he said "I see no reason to lend undue credence to the stories of others."

"Very wise. Well, foreigner, this is the true tale of Janagar, and it is not a catch-all of vague stories handed down, mouth to mouth, by generations of illiterate tale-spinners. This is a true history, carved in stone by the people who lived through the events and further elaborated by their descendants, of whom I am one. The history is unbroken from the days of glory to this, so you may believe my words."

He drained his cup and nodded. "I am listening."

She clapped her hands and the slave girl came in again with two full goblets. She collected the empty ones and bowed her way out. When she was gone, Omia began.

"Know, O stranger," she said, in what Conan judged to be a ritual storytelling formula, "that Janagar of the Opal Gates reigned for five thousand years as the queen of the world, the center of an empire that is no longer even a name among the legends of the barbaric men of this age. When the last golden tile was laid atop the dome of Janagar's last great temple, Python was but a crude sprawl of thatch-roofed stone huts, built by primitive snake worshipers who knew not the secrets of writing or more of sorcery than the petty marvels of unwashed shamans and mountebanks."

"That was long ago, indeed," Conan said.

"Longer than your savage mind can comprehend," she assured him. "But even in the days of glory, Janagar was already so ancient that its early history was fragmentary, for even the greatest civilization begins with primitive villagers, and writings scratched on wood, painted on leather, inked on parchment, perish with time. This much we know: Like all great city-states, Janagar's early power was based upon the might of the sword. The armies of Janagar crushed all opposition before them, laid lesser peoples under our yoke and seized their wealth for our own.

"With military might came fabulous wealth, and the people of Janagar learned that wealth was power, and a finer power than that of the sword, for with wealth, they could hire others to bear swords, leaving the lords of Janagar to pursue worthier endeavors."

To the Cimmerian, this meant the very beginning of degeneracy, but he wisely maintained his silence.

"For many, many centuries, the lords of Janagar savored the joys of vast power combined with vast wealth. Every whim was theirs to satisfy. From the farthest corners of the world were brought the most exotic curiosities for the collections of the great. The most beautiful daughters and sons of all nations came to Janagar as slaves. They were decked in silks and jewels, and they served the tables of Janagar with the most delectable viands, the rarest delicacies, of all the world."

Conan was about to observe that mushrooms must have been a terrible comedown from such a diet, but he held his tongue.

"But in time," she went on, "even the delights of unlimited wealth must pall. For it occurred to the lords of Janagar that these were the mere treasures of the material world, and that other delights lay beyond this one—transcendent beauties and ecstasies to be seized by those with the knowledge to gain access and the courage to lay hold of them." She sipped her wine, her eyes dreamy behind the holes in her mask.

"Mankind was young then," she said, almost whispering the words. "He knew little beyond the use of stone and metal. Even the lords of Janagar had scant knowledge of the spirit world at first. But if mankind was young, others were not"

"What mean you?" he asked, his scalp prickling.

"I mean that man was not the only thinking creature in those days. There were others: beings far more ancient, their wisdom to that of man's like that of an old sage to the knowledge of a child. These beings were far gone in senescence, their empires long since crumbled, but still they existed in the obscure corners of the world.

"In the last great age of the priest-kings, the order went out to scour the world and seek out the remnants of these prehuman races, that we might glean from them their secrets. Centuries were consumed in these expeditions alone. Caravans set out, ships sailed forth, all charged with this task. Generals led great treks, accompanied by hordes of armies. Merchants set forth with bags of wealth to offer bribes. Even lone adventurers like yourself went a-wandering, with no more than a sword at (their) belt and a gleam of reward in their eyes.

"And me strange, eldritch creatures were found." Her eyes and voice were haunted with the race-memory of the time. "A few of them could almost be mistaken for humans, except for minor but upsetting differences. More were manlike only in general shape. Others bore no human semblance -whatever. All had much to teach."

"Knowledge such as they had is best left untouched by men," said Conan.

"The great ones of Janagar were never as lesser men," she said contemptuously. "Do not presume to judge us by your primitive, barbaric standards. From the strange creatures we reaped riches of knowledge undreamed of. The sorcerers of Janagar, in their fumbling experiments, would have taken aeons of trial and error to gain the knowledge we reaped from the uncanny races in a few short centuries. Wizards who had been able to cast their consciousness only a few short leagues learned to visit distant stars in their trances. From communing with the inhuman beings of this world, they came to speak with intelligences from other planes and other worlds."

"A man of wisdom travels on his own feet," Conan grumbled, "or on the feet of beasts."

"Don't be tedious," she said. "Even that great, hulking frame and those powerful muscles could bore me if your thoughts persist in being so narrow. Do you want to hear this?"

"Forgive me," he said. "I am listening." If she thought him stupid, so much the better.

"That is more like it. Know then, that in the life of every civilization, there are times of growth and times of stagnation. If a time of stagnation goes on too long, rot sets in and the civilization falls. With each new, rejuvenating source of energy, the culture grows and stretches itself and tests its limits before sinking into self-satisfaction. So it always was with Janagar. As a young, barbaric race, we were drunk with the power of steel and bronze and the shedding of enemy blood. Then we expanded further with the power of gold and other wealth, the intoxication of acquisitiveness. Finally, we grasped the ultimate power of sorcery, and we worked our will upon the world of mankind, and even into other planes.

"But even with us, there were limits. As a young race, we learned the limits of armed might. In our middle age, we found that there were some things unobtainable even with the greatest wealth. In our final stage, we found that as humans, there were limits to the sorcerous powers we could wield."

" 'As humans,' you say?"

"Aye. So you are listening, after all. It was true. We knew that we shared the world with thinking creatures that were not human. In the worlds beyond, there were races infinitely ancient and infinitely powerful. It chafed our pride that we could not be their equals. The human brain was not organized to wield their powers. The human body could not live long enough to perfectly master many arts customary to other races. It was decided that the masters of Janagar had to somehow absorb the substance of the nonhuman races."

With a numbing chill, Conan remembered the artistic motif he had seen everywhere in the city, above and below: entwined chains of human and demonic forms coupling in obscene combinations.

"And so it was done," she went on. "In Janagar, men and women mated with beings in no wise ever intended to mingle their blood with that of mortal humans. It grew into a ritual and the core of our religion for the last thousand years of the city, and the progeny that sprang from this practice was strange beyond belief. Unholy combinations of human and alien sat upon the thrones of Janagar, and took part in councils that would strike any living human of today mad with horror."

"That I can well believe," Conan said.

"The price was terrible, but the mages of Janagar would pay any price, endure any sacrifice, for great knowledge. And great knowledge was theirs. The deepest secrets of matter and spirit were theirs to know and to exploit. Any knowledge they wished was theirs for desiring it, AH the creatures of this world became slaves to them. Even some of the beings of other worlds and planes bowed down to them."

"But not all?" Conan asked.

"No," she admitted. "Not all." For the first time, hesitation crept into her voice. "There were beings in the higher planes, beings of such mind-blasting might that the half-human mages of Janagar called them only the Powers. At first, they seemed unbelievably great, but unnoticing of humans, like the accursed sun. Whatever their doings, they had no interest in man, whether in this world or another."

"These Powers," Conan said uneasily. "Were they gods?"

"Who knows what a god may be?" she said, waving a hand dismissively. "As often as not, 'god' is only a word men attach to that which they do not understand, but fear. To me savage, animals and rivers, storms and lightning, are all gods. Some think fire is a god. Many have worshiped the accursed sun as a god. Often the god is manlike, usually no more than a magnified ancestor whose name is the oldest his descendants remember. Those wizards of old had long since ceased believing in gods. But they believed in the Powers."

By this time, their cups were empty again. She clapped her hands. "This is a long tale, and it must not be hurried. Let us have some refreshment." No sooner were the words gone from her lips than the slave girl came in with more wine, accompanied this time by another, who bore a tray of viands and set it before them. Bowing, the women withdrew.

"Join me," Omia said, waving a hand over the tray, Conan helped himself. He ignored the mushrooms in their various preparations and sauces. The tray also bore dried dates, raisins and figs, as well as other preserved fruits. He downed some honeyed figs and helped them along with a draught of wine. He knew that all of the fruits were typical products of Stygia. He took a handful of dates and held them before her.

"These never grew here beneath the ground," he said.

"So they did not," she agreed. "But we do not speak here of commonplaces such as food. Now we speak of higher tilings." Clearly, she did not wish to reveal the source of these tilings.

He feigned indifference. "In truth, preserved fruits are a lowly subject compared to the rise and fall of empire. I but mentioned it because I far prefer these to your unending mushrooms."

At this she smiled. "Our mastery of the cultivation of fungi extends to far more than mere mushrooms, although I would not expect you to know the difference. Long ago, we learned to grow things that have no need of the accursed sun, and our table is rich and varied, had you but the palate to discern its excellence."

"Stronger fare is the rule above the ground," he said. "I've no complaint about your wine, though." He waved his third goblet with a slightly unsteady hand, feigning tipsiness. He had a strong head and could have drunk the golden wine at this rate for hours before giving way to genuine drunkenness.

"Perhaps you had best avail yourself of it less lavishly," she murmured. "I might have little use for you later if you overindulge."

He laughed loudly. "This? Why, I can drink like a camel! Have no fear of that. It takes more than a bit of drink to unman Conan of Cimmeria!" He laughed again, hoping that his windy boast further convinced her that he was an ignorant buffoon. It was more than clear to him that her attraction to him lay

not in his brain power.

"I rejoice to hear that," she said, "and you shall learn the reason anon. Now, where were we?"

He ate slices of melon preserved in a gingery syrup, longing for some real meat. "The Powers," he reminded her.

"Oh, yes. I continue: With their blending of human and inhuman and the many subtle shades thereof, the mages of Janagar became masters of certain arts previously unattainable to mere humans. As they exercised these arts and accomplished greater and yet greater feats, the dread notice of the Powers at last was turned upon them. Some unseen, unknown line had been crossed, and the Powers were alerted. At first, the great sorcerers sought to deal with these intelligences as they had with all others, to learn from them and to exploit the knowledge.

"It was not to be. The attention of the Powers meant their unrelenting wrath. One after another, the wizards who contacted them were blasted from existence by spells so terrible that the very fabric of the world vibrated every time one of the great sorcerers was struck down. In your travels, have you not heard many tales of ancient catastrophes that took place in time long past?"

"That I have," he said. "Great earth-shakings and worldwide floods and terrible volcanic eruptions for a part of every myth cycle I have heard."

"And do these ancient myths not always have a tale of a war between gods, or between gods and giants, or gods and men?"

"Aye," he said. "In my native Cimmeria, we have an old tale of a great fight between our god, Crom, and Ymir of the Aesir a battle that shook the earth. Everyone else has such a legend." Without asking her leave, he refilled his goblet from the dew-beaded pitcher that stood upon the diminished platter of food.

"All these tales date from that epochal combat between the Powers and the wizards of Janagar. It went on for centuries, and it altered the structure of the entire world."

"If the Powers were so great," Conan said, "how can it be that the fight was so lengthy? Surely these god-things could easily crush mere wizards, however powerful they might be by mortal standards."

"A shrewd question. But you must remember that the wizards of Janagar were *not* truly human by this time. Their mastery of the higher arts was very near that of the Powers. It was in raw force that they were most inferior. But also these battles raged upon other worlds and other planes. For long, long years, the wizards of Janagar fought to keep the very location of our world secret from the Powers, whose driving aim was ever to destroy the very home world of their rivals. This, it was learned, they had done many, many times before."

"Your wizards trifled with things best left alone," he said.

She shrugged her shapely shoulders elegantly. "It is not in the nature of a truly great people to shrink from challenges, whatever the odds and however great the consequences."

"But they risked the whole world!" he said.

"What of that? Failure meant the destruction of Janagar and all its people. Should that dread consequence come to pass, what could it matter that all the inferior races were exterminated as well? If your house burns, do you weep for the rats and roaches that perish in the blaze?"

"You have a point," he conceded. It was not the first time Conan had encountered such an attitude. Many a king had declared that upon his own demise, it booted nothing whether fire or flood consumed the earth.

"In time," she went on, "the greatest mages were no more, and all the higher planes were lost to us. In the end, all our efforts devolved to a frantic attempt to stave off defeat and save our world and empire. Of course the most powerful spells were invoked to preserve Janagar itself. Others protected the greater cities of the empire. The spells centered upon the temples, where the most awesome and terrible rites were carried out, day and night."

"What sort of spells could protect them from such beings?" Conan asked, fascinated in spite of himself by this tale of the death-throes of an empire.

"The final spell, resorted to after all else was exhausted, was the Great Spell of Unchanging. Once it was in place, the city thus protected would remain as it was, inviolate and without alteration. More to the point, it would become invisible to the Powers, and without the focal point of these places of great wizardry, they could not enter this world to destroy and consume."

"So that explains the city above," Conan said. "But if the Powers never found this world, how was the land destroyed and the fertile fields of Janagar turned to sandy desert?"

"That was not done by the Powers. The sheer force required to maintain the spells sapped the very life-force of the land, sucking the fertility from it like water into a sponge. Once Janagar lay near a great river, and from it we drew water by the most wonderful system of canals ever known. The river dwindled between its banks and finally disappeared."

"Why did not Janagar perish then?" he asked, already knowing the answer. "When a city's water is no more, the city dies. I have seen it happen, when a besieged city's aqueducts are cut and it has no wells. When the cisterns are exhausted, death is certain."

"Surely even you have guessed," she said, smiling. "We dug until we found our river again. It had abandoned the land above, but it still flowed through a great system of caverns beneath the ground. The high priests of Janagar declared that Ike *am*. was accursed, that if we were not to perish, we must dig, hewing a new Janagar from the bowels of the earth."

"But to maintain the Great Spell of Unchanging, the city above the ground must be kept exactly as it was upon the day that the spell went into effect. To that end, every night after the accursed sun has gone down, teams of expert artificers go up through the great temple and out into the city to repair such trifling damage as the passage of time has inflicted. Since the winds and sands of the desert do not intrude, and since it never rains, this damage is slight."

"What became of the other cities?" Conan asked.

"They lacked the perfect will of Janagar. Some persisted for centuries, but they failed to maintain their cities unchanging, and the spell was thereby sapped. One by one, we lost contact with them and by then, doubtless the Powers were otherwise distracted, for they made no attempt to enter our world through the ruins."

Conan remembered the great ruined temple where he had seen the twins communing with the ancient. It must have been a remnant of one of those cities of the empire of Janagar. Now only the ruins of a single building remained, and all that was left of its Great Spell of Unchanging was a rectangular patch of grass that no animal would graze upon.

"And you have lived here beneath the ground ever since?" Conan asked. "You have eschewed the sun and clean, open air?"

"That is so," she said, rolling onto her belly and cradling her chin upon crossed forearms. "It has suited us well, but it is a way of life not without ... consequences. That is how you and your companions happen to interest us."

"How so?" he asked, knowing he would not relish the answer.

"Preserving ourselves from the Powers, and then from the curse of the sun, solved only our most immediate problem," she said. "What we had done to ourselves in our pursuit of wizardly knowledge needed undoing."

"You mean mixing human blood with inhuman?" he asked.

"Exactly. The folk who first burrowed here beneath the earth would not look to you like your near kin, to say the least"

His flesh crept at the thought. "That I can well imagine."

"What was needed first was a strict breeding program, to eliminate all trace of the nonhuman from among us. It took hundreds of generations, but at last the deed was accomplished and at last the people of Janagar became truly human once more."

This, the Cimmerian gravely doubted. There was more to humanity than appearance, and a bloodline so utterly polluted could never be rendered truly human again. He suspected that they had

achieved no more than to regain the *look* of humanity.

"Once again," she said, "our great accomplishment came at an equally great price. Our pool of human blood was too restricted from the beginning. For reasons both supernatural and alchemical, there are undesirable consequences to be met when building from so narrow a base."

"A lot of words," Conan said, "to say that inbreeding produces degeneracy."

"You oversimplify," she said, frowning. "We are not breeding animals here, but human beings. In any case, it has been our policy that whenever human stock of exceptional merit should happen our way, we introduce it into our bloodlines. The desert being what it is, this does not happen often."

"Why do you not go out and find fresh blood on your own?" he demanded.

"You forget that we cannot abide the rays of the accursed sun. No. here we stay, and any new stock must come to us. Long ago, we exhausted the possibilities of the desert nomads. For a while, a single nomadic tribe brought us captives of exceptional merit, but the desert grew too vast. In the end, they could no longer carry enough water to keep themselves and their captives alive for the journey. They were the last outside people to know the location of Janagar."

Conan guessed that this tribe must be the Wadim of whom the old man had told him. Their strange, fragmentary, twisted tale had been the last flickering ancestral memory of a time when their tribe was young and the desert was smaller and less forbidding.

"But you have contact with the outside world by means of the river," he said, speaking very slowly and deliberately, like a man on the border of drunkenness. He poured himself another goblet. "You cannot gull me. These fruits—" he waved a hand, almost oversetting the pitcher—"these are from outside. And I have seen things of Stygian make down here."

"We have some contact," she said, "with a small tribe of river-men who live near the place where our river reenters the world of the accursed sun. The river-folk are a small, malformed people who do not interest us, and they are too weak to take desirable captives to trade. They keep our existence silent lest other tribes learn their secret and slay men all to seize the trade for themselves."

Conan nodded ponderously. "I can well see how you desire us as breeding stock," he said, deliberately slurring his words. He smote himself upon his brawny chest. "I am of the pure blood of Cimmeria, home of the greatest warriors in the world. Achilea is a magnificent woman, stronger than almost any man. Her three women are splendid, strapping wenches, much finer than the women here." He pondered for a while, as if not fully aware of what he had said. "Yourself excepted, of course," he amended.

At this, she shook her head and laughed. "Barbarian, do you truly think that it is for your strength and looks that we wish to mingle your blood with ours?"

"Is it not?" he said, truly puzzled this time.

"By no means. When we lost our empire and were forced to breed the nonhuman from among ourselves, we lost as well our capacity for working magick. We have much knowledge and no way to use it. It is as if we were the greatest of miners, yet had no picks or shovels or sledges."

She smiled strangely, and in that smile Conan detected the lingering taint of the nonhuman. "With your clean, barbaric blood, the blood of a younger race, we may regain our power to wield the great spells of our ancestors. Janagar may once again rise to her rightful place as queen of the world!"

Of all the reasons she could have for desiring him, this was the last one Conan would have chosen. "So you want me to breed with, eh?" he said.

"Yes," she replied. "And I see no need for further discussion of the matter." Lazily, she began to push herself up from her recumbent posture. Her sheer robe fell away, revealing even more of her ripe contours.

"Aye!" he agreed heartily. "Let's be about it." He grasped her beneath the arms and lifted her without effort. With one hand, he peeled away her veil and then he planted a sloppy kiss upon her lips. Still holding the woman, he lurched to his feet.

"Wait!" she cried in exasperation. "You are too—"

"Too what?" he demanded, fumbling at her cape as if the knot that bound it at her throat were too complex for his dexterity. Finally, he simply ripped the garment away,

She pounded at his face with her fists. "Slowly, you drunken oaf!"

Abruptly, Conan dropped her and she landed with a thump upon the cushions. "I think ..." he mumbled, swaying back and forth as if his ankles were poorly designed hinges. "I think ..." Slowly, majestically, like a great tree falling, the Cimmerian toppled over and landed on his face, not putting forth his hands to slow his fall. With a cry, Omia scrambled away from his trajectory, but not swiftly enough to prevent her feet from being pinned beneath his great torso.

With a jerk, the woman got her feet free and stood. She then employed them in locking her fallen, would-be paramore. "Wretch! Sot! Drunken brute!" Each epithet was punctuated by a sound kick to the ribs. She elicited but a few grunts from the collapsed warrior and discovered that she was accomplishing nothing but the bruising of her delicate feet.

Conan did not change expression during her frustrated tirade, thinking only that these people had grown truly degenerate in their antlike existence. Achilea would have smashed his ribs in half with one kick. In time, soreness of foot and shortness of wind caused her to desist. She clapped her hands and Conan heard someone enter the room. By the lightness of the tread, he guessed that it was one of the slave girls. Words were whispered and the slave left. While she was waiting, Omia assayed a kick to his head. It made his ear sting, but from her outcry, he knew that it hurt her foot far worse.

Heavier steps announced a newcomer of greater heft. "This is the great warrior who slew the crocodile?" The voice belonged to Abbadas.

"He had the woman's help," she answered. "This one is an animal, and a stupid one at that! What sort of man prefers wine to the body of a queen?" The scorn in her voice would have raised blisters on the back of a man more sensitive than Conan.

"After all. Omia," Abbadas said, sounding vastly amused, "it was not for their great culture and polish that we wanted them. I am sure that I will waste neither time nor wine trying to get the big woman into a receptive frame of mind."

"Of that I had no doubt. I had thought this one more intelligent, at first."

"I had not thought you brought him here for conversation." The sneer was plain in his voice,

"How often do I find someone new to speak with?" she asked peevishly. She gave him a brief summation of their talk.

"You told him far more than necessary," Abbadas chided. "This snoring hulk did not need to know all that. Now I must keep even closer watch upon him."

"Why?" she asked. "We will have our way with him and then dispose of him. What little may have lodged in that thick skull will be of no use to him."

"Still, I do not like it," Abbadas said. "Hopelessness of escape is the best shackle for binding a prisoner. Best he were not to harbor futile thoughts."

"Away with him," she ordered. "He defiles my chambers. I shall try him again when he is sober. Next time, I'll not waste words upon him. Haul this vast carcass out of here."

"As my queen commands," Abbadas said insolently. "Guards!"

Moments later, the chamber filled with footsteps and the Cimmerian was rebound. Then, amid much puffing and groaning, he was lifted and carried through the labyrinthine warren that was underground Janagar. A short time subsequent, he was dumped unceremoniously upon the floor of his cell and his wall chain reattached. Then the guards shuffled out. Unsure of the cell's occupancy, Conan waited.

"Your friend provided us little entertainment this time," Abbadas taunted. "Best you be not so remiss, else you shall suffer for it. Be ready for my summons, woman. Soon." The only reply was a spitting sound. Then he heard Abbadas leave the cell, and the further sound of his steps diminishing down the hallway without.

"Conan, have they slain you?" Achilea queried, her voice full of concern. "Nay, I can see you breathing. But they must have tortured you sorely to render you senseless. Oh!" He heard her chains

rattle and felt the frustration in her voice.

"These will not let me reach you. Oh, Conan, I ..." Her voice hesitated and trailed off. Then he heard the sound of sniffing. "What is this?" Concern changed to anger as if by magic. "Wine? You are drunk! You Cimmerian fool, did you get hauled away to a tavern instead of a torture chamber? Only you could accomplish such a thing!"

An edge of suspicion crept into her voice. "That evil woman wants to breed, eh? So she plied you with wine to overcome scruples she fancied you to have? Well, she needn't have bothered! Wake up, damn you! I want you to hear me cursing you!"

Abruptly he sat up and she jerked back.

"Actually, I am not even drunk. It does me good to know that you were worried about me." He grinned insolently and her beautiful face flushed scarlet.

"You think I care about your miserable hide and its welfare?" she said lamely. "I but need you to help get us out of here!"

"Aye, I'll believe that"

"If you will," she said, hissing, her eyes narrowed, "then I will agree to believe you when you tell me what happened between you and the queen of the degenerates."

Stretching out on his pallet and pillowing his head upon his interlaced fingers, Conan recited the tale of Janagar as he had heard it from Omia, This he interlarded with descriptions of the queen and her slaves and the furnishings of her chambers. With sidelong glances, he satisfied himself that Achilea was clenching her teeth each time he mentioned the queen's beauty.

"And so you feigned drunkenness," she said at last, "and naught else passed between you? Not that it means anything to me."

"Aye, it is true," he said, amused.

"Very well then. Now we know that the river is truly here someplace and that by means of it, we can reach the outside world."

"One other thing bothers me," Conan said.

"What is that?"

"The crocodile. What did they do with it?"

The crocodile?" she said, exasperated. "What care we, so long as it is dead?"

"Truly, it is the crocodile's tail that plagues my thoughts," he told her.

"Its tail? Did the queen put something in your wine that weakened what little wit you have? What care you about its tail?"

He went on, unperturbed. "Skinned and properly cooked, crocodile tail makes fine eating. Crom's bones, but I am weary of the food in this wretched place!"

Thirteen

Time did not weigh heavily upon them. When Conan awoke, he knew instantly that he had been asleep for little more than two hours. Even in this underworld where night and day did not exist, his time sense had not deserted him. A sound had disturbed his slumber, and he waited in utter stillness to hear it again. Nearby, Achilea lay on her side, breathing deeply and steadily, sound asleep. He doubted that her instincts were less sharp than his own. But she had never spent time in a dungeon before. Like most inexperienced persons, she probably assumed that thick walls, bars and chains meant that at the very least, she could sleep without danger.

Conan, with his broad experience of dungeons, jails, village lockups, ships' brigs, slave-pits, coffles, chain gangs and other means of confinement, knew that all prisons were savage places, where men confined like animals under the care of brutal guards and whimsical wardens could turn on one another like starving rats in a cage. And a man was most vulnerable in his sleep. Conan could scarcely count the times he had awakened to find a fellow prisoner stabbed in his sleep with a makeshift dagger, strangled with his own chains, brained with a rock or pitched overboard for the sharks, and the murder always

committed by enemies within the prison. He had frequently awakened in such places to find disgruntled brothers of the chain thirsty for his own blood. Thus he knew to sleep even more lightly than usual when he wore shackles.

He heard the sound again. Someone was in the hall outside the cell. He knew by the trod of the steps that it was not one of the regular guards, nor was it Abbadas returning. His ears were sensitive to such subtleties. The tread was light, stealthy. Even before the figure appeared in the door of the cell, the Cimmerian was almost sure who it was.

He lay nearly as still as a corpse, his breathing as deep and steady as Achilea's. He knew better than to try faking a snore. Such ruses were rarely convincing to an experienced trickster, and he knew this one to be a veteran. Through slit-eyes he saw the figure crouch and come into the cell on all fours. The flickering light of the smokeless torch outside gleamed momentarily upon something in its right hand: an object of bright metal.

The figure drew nearer, nearer yet, and then the Cimmerian's brawny left arm shot out and powerful fingers snapped around a sinewy neck so swiftly that the movement would have been a mere blur in broad daylight. In the gloom of the cell, it was wholly invisible. A high-pitched squawk was cut off abruptly by the pressure of Conan's thumb.

Achilea jolted to a sitting position amid a rattle of chains. "Conan! What ... who is that?" She blinked rapidly,

"Why, this is our old friend, Amram. As to why he is here, he is about to tell us. Of course, it may be that he would rather die than speak. He is about to make that choice!" Amram's frantically flailing hands pantomimed a deep desire to speak. Conan relaxed his grip fractionally, allowing the man to drag a little air into his shocked lungs.

"My friends!" he squealed, the wind whistling through his constricted windpipe. "I mean you no harm! I am here to offer you salvation!"

"You do this by creeping like a reptile?" Conan asked coldly. "You do this by sneaking up to my side with a weapon in your fist?" His hand began to tighten again.

"No weapon! Look?" He held forth his right hand. Indeed, in its palm lay not a dagger, but a key shining in the uncanny light.

"Much better," Conan growled "But still not good enough. Why did you desert us in the sandstorm, you rogue? Where are the twins? What are you to these ant-people, and why did you lure us here with your lying story?"

"Please, my friend, there is no time!" Amram wailed.

"Oh, but a prisoner has little but time," Conan said. "I am eager to hear your story. Only now, I shall be alert for lies. The first lie I think I hear, I shall break your scrawny neck!"

"But, my Cimmerian companion," Amram said, "I had not thought you to be a man so fond of talk!"

"I care not what his story is," Achilea said impatiently. "Just loose us, little man!"

"I do not like this," Conan said sullenly. "What does this insect ever do except lead people into traps?"

Achilea glared at him in exasperation. "Traps? We are chained in a dungeon, you dolt! What is he going to do to us that is worse?"

"You have not seen much of the world, woman," he retorted, "if you think this is the worst it has to offer."

"My good friends," Amram said soothingly, his voice obsequious, "let us not bicker. I can see that you two have a certain difference of opinion, but this is not the time or the place to sort things out. Allow me to present you with your freedom, and you may discuss matters at greater length when you have the leisure."

"Very well," Conan said, "but I am not deceiving myself."

In this place, being without chains does not mean freedom. We wore no chains in the pit when we fought the crocodile."

"I think it will mean an improvement in our condition," Achilea said, almost frantic with impatience. "Unlock these bonds, Amram, before I go mad!"

"At once, my lady. Thai is, if my good friend the Cimmerian will be so good as to release me."

"Conan!"

"Oh, very well." With ill grace, he relaxed his grip, only to clamp his hand around the man's bony ankle. "You get your foot back when we are out of these chains," he said with a dangerous frown.

Amram clucked. "Such a hard man to please. And here I expected gratitude. Kind words at the very least"

"When we are free and well away from here," Conan said, "I will sing your highest praises. I will name a son after you if you want, but do not betray us again."

For a few minutes, Amram was busy with the locks on their various neck rings and shackles. Apparently his key was not made specifically for their fastenings, but was a skeleton type that required considerable skill to manipulate.

"Good thing they didn't use rivets on these things," Conan grouched. But soon the chains fell away and they were on their feet, rubbing at sore flesh, flexing their freed limbs.

"Now we go and release my women," Achilea said.

"There is no time," Amram said, shaking his head emphatically. "They are just servants. Leave them."

Now it was Achilea's turn to be unreasonable. She grasped him by the neck as Conan had. "If I were not a queen and therefore conscious of every debt of gratitude, I would wring your neck this very second. My companion here is more than familiar with things like locks and shackles. I would wager that he knows how to use your key."

"Aye, it is a simple device," Conan affirmed, smiling grimly.

"Oh, very well, then!" said Amram, gritting his teeth at their seemingly suicidal calmness. "I will unchain them. But the time may cost us dear"

"Just get us out of here," Conan said. "Get us to our weap-ons, and we will see to it that all the cost is borne by the ant-people."

"You speak overconfidently," the little man grumbled as they walked the few steps to the other cell. They went inside and Achilea woke her women, placing a palm across the mouth of each as she shook them. The three wore joyous expressions, but their discipline was perfect and they asked no questions as their chains were removed. Clearly, their captors did DM think they were as dangerous as were the two leaders, for here each wore only a single neck ring attached to the wall by means of a chain.

"Now." Conan said when all were loosed, "lead us to our weapons, then lead us to the river."

"Do you think this is a casual tour, that I may lead you to whichever attraction takes your fancy?"

"Just our weapons, then," Achilea said. "We will make our own way to the river. And our belongings from the camel packs, too, I want my drinking horn."

"Your drinking horn?" Conan said, raising a sardonic eyebrow. He had not seen the elaborate, silver-mounted thing since Leng, where she had carefully packed it away for the journey.

"Aye, it is an ancestral treasure of my people. I'll not depart without it."

"The last I heard, your people had done with you. But if you must have it, that suits me. I'll settle for my sword and dirk."

Amram looked back and forth from one to *the* other of them as if at two exotic beasts. "You are mad, the both of you, [am among madmen."

"For some time," Conan commented. "But it seems to me that you know how to make the best bargain for yourself no matter where you find yourself, so continue on that course and do as we bid you. I take it that you would be away from this awful place?"

"I desire that almost as much as life itself!" Amram said fervently.

"Aye," Achilea put in. "You are plainly a man willing to endure much for the sake of life itself. Do as

we say." She patted him on the shaven head, but her caress was as menacing as the Cimmerian's blunter threats.

Amram sighed deeply. "Very well, then. Come with me and be very, very quiet. Our lives depend upon it."

"Lead on," said Conan, grinning.

In the anteroom, they found the guards on duty. They were either dead or drugged, and the fleeing prisoners did not bother to ascertain which. Conan stooped to gather up a Stygian short sword, and Achilea took a dagger. Ekun was about to lift a long-handled combination spear and ax with a wicked hook on one side, but Achilea stopped her with a motion.

"No pole-arms," she instructed, her voice scarcely above a whisper. "They are too awkward in these passages and they may make noise. One-hand weapons only, should we come upon more." The women nodded as Amram leaned out the doorway and looked both ways.

"There is no one without," he said in a loud whisper. "Follow me."

"Have no concern about that," Conan admonished as he came up behind the little man with stealthy tread. "I shall be right at your back."

"One would think you did not trust me," Amram said in tones of hurt.

The Cimmerian ignored the comment. "Why is it so quiet?" he asked. They passed through an area he knew from earlier experience to be devoted to manufactures. All was silent, the chambers deserted.

"It is night. Even down here, where sun and moon are unknown, there must be day and night. People must sleep, and for the most efficient organization of labor, all sleep at the same time. Only the ventilation staff and a few very necessary services continue through this 'night.'"

Achilea came up behind him. "What sort of necessary services?"

"Hisst!" Amram raised a hand and signaled them to silence. "One of diem comes even now. In here!" He chivvied them into a side chamber where cleaning supplies were stored. Amid brooms, brushes, mops and pails, they stood packed tightly together.

"What is it?" Achilea demanded in a whisper. Her body was pressed closely against Conan's back.

"I care not," said the Cimmerian with a smile. "I like it here." She swatted him on the back of the head.

"Quiet!" Amram commanded. "It is the fire patrol."

The curtain of the closet had been drawn so that only a slit was open. Two slaves came walking down the corridor outside. At every flame tube, they paused. Conan had noted in passage that only each third tube was flaming, doubtless because it was "night." These men adjusted the flames of the lighted fixtures. At each darkened tube, one of the slaves leaned over its flared end and sniffed, then went on. At one such, the slave sniffed, frowned, and made a silent signal. The other slave took a bronze tool from a pouch at his belt and made some small adjustment to the fixture. The other slave sniffed once more, then nodded. They passed on.

When the two were out of sight around a corner, the fugitives and their guide left the closet. "That has cost us time," Amram fretted.

"What were they doing?" Conan asked.

"The lighting fixtures must be monitored constantly," Amram told him. Having something to explain seemed to relieve his nerves. "They bum a natural vapor that comes from deep within the earth. It bums cleanly, with no smoke and no scent, but in its unburned state, it is deadly poison. If a flame goes out, the vapor continues to gush forth. It can kill many if it is not shut off quickly. And if enough of it should accumulate, the instant a flame is touched to it, the whole mass erupts like a volcano. In the past, entire districts of the underground city have perished thus."

"Why was one of the slaves sniffing at it?" Achilea asked.

"Checking for leaks in the fixtures," Amram said. "They are made of bronze and ceramic, and with long use, they can work loose and allow the vapor to leak out in small amounts, but still enough to be

dangerous. They need constant adjusting. Because the vapor has no odor, another vapor is added to it in the processing plant to give it a sharp scent. Thus may a leak be detected."

"Not only do drey live beneath the earth like burrowing insects," Conan said, "but they suffer the constant threat of burning and suffocation. What sort of way is that for men to live?"

Amram shrugged. "Have you ever sailed upon the sea? Life aboard ship is far more precarious."

"At least it is in the open air, beneath the sun and the stars," Conan protested.

"Each to his own taste," Amram said. "I am a man of broad tolerance and I find all modes of life to be equally peculiar."

In silence, they traversed the sleeping city, walking down broad corridors, padding through narrow passages flanked by sleeping chambers whence drifted the sounds of snoring and wheezing, up long stairways, some straight, others winding. Several times they detected the approach of flame patrols, and then they ducked into the nearest room that had no lighting fixture to be checked. They came to a vast chamber from which came a sharp, nose-stinging scent.

"This is the vapor-works," Amram cautioned. "Use utmost care. There are workers on duty here at all hours."

The chamber was cavernous, and Conan entered it with trepidation, not because of the danger of discovery, but because of his great distaste at being near anything as uncanny as a vapor-works. He knew from what Omia had said that these people were not even capable of sorcery, but this great reservoir for burning gas was sufficiently unearthly that to his barbarian instincts, it was little different from the most powerful wizardry.

The light was dim and uncertain, provided here not by open flames, but by clumps of the glowing fungi. The sickly green, blue, orange and yellow phosphorescence provided sufficient illumination that they could recognize the shapes of huge, closed vats of riveted bronze sheet from which trailed bewildering tangles of metal pipes leading to smaller tanks, to other pipes, and to fixtures to which Conan could not assign a name. Everywhere there were wheels of greater or lesser dimensions, apparently controlling valves to regulate the flow of the vapor. Over everything lay the pungent scent of the additive. Conan wondered how they would ever be able to detect a leak *here*.

Among the mysterious fixtures moved shadowy shapes, some small, some hulking. With a prickling scalp, he saw men with long, heavily muscled arms and shoulders of gorilla dimensions, but with heads that were unnaturally small. He tapped Amram on the shoulder and pointed at one who walked along a catwalk above them, his knuckles almost dragging upon the metal treads, his mouth agape and his eyes blankly staring. Amram whispered in his ear.

"Those are harmless—slaves specially bred to turn the largest valve wheels no matter how badly they may be stuck. When there is an emergency here, there is no time to call in extra help or use mechanical aid. The vapor must be shut off instantly."

Even in the midst of his powerful urge to get away, Conan sought to memorize the salient features of the operation. Compared to the city without, it was a noisy place, full of hissings and rumblings, the creak and clank of metal, the sounds of barked orders and the stertorous breathing of the hulking slaves, whose small noses and mouths were scarcely up to the task of providing air for their overgrown bodies.

They passed a gigantic horizontal wheel to which no fewer than six of the massive slaves were chained by the wrist Conan surmised that this was the master valve, whereby the vapor could be cut off to the whole city, including this facility, in an extreme emergency. He wondered how the city could ever function in total darkness, then realized that the answer was all around him: the fungus that glowed with its own cold, unearthly light. Doubtless the ant-people kept enough of it in all parts of the city to provide instant illumination.

No doubt about it, he thought, they had planned well. But then, they had had many thousands of years to perfect the art of living without the sun. He shuddered at the thought. The slaves and the free workers in this place revealed with merciless clarity the consequences of such a life. The cold light of the fungi gave their colorless skin the semblance of the rotting flesh of corpses.

Once through the vapor works, they were back on more familiar ground. The Cimmerian recognized the environs as an area they had passed through upon first entering the city. They were climbing now, and he guessed that Amram was taking them back up to the great temple. He did not greatly relish the thought of recrossing the desert, but anything was preferable to spending more days as the guest of Omia and Abbadas.

During the climb, Amram took them down an unfamiliar side corridor. "Where are we going?" Conan demanded, grasping the small man's arm and halting him. "I don't remember this place."

"Nor should you," was the answer. "But you said you wanted your weapons and belongings, did you not?"

Conan grinned. "Lead on."

They continued until, at a bend in the passage, Amram halted them. He pulled Conan and Achilea's heads close to him and whispered almost too faintly to hear: "Around this comer is a guardroom. There should be at least two guards on duty, and these you must deal with yourselves. Your belongings lie in the chamber beyond." The two nodded and drew their acquired weapons. At Conan's signal, they rushed around the comer.

The two guards flanked the door, leaning on pole-arms, barely awake. They wore black armor and beast-masks and were so startled that they had not even time to speak before the two were upon them. Conan grasped the one on the left by the throat and rammed his short sword through to the spine. Achilea put her dagger through the throat of her victim as the women rushed from behind to grasp the arms of both guards and lower them to the floor without a betraying clatter. With great dexterity, Amram darted forward to grab a toppling pole-arm before it could make a noise.

Instantly, Conan dashed through the door into the chamber beyond, bloody sword in his fist, turning in a circle, ready for more enemies. Nothing moved within the guardroom and he straightened, surveying the room's contents. It was not one of the larger chambers, about ten paces on a side, but it was crammed with chests, and upon the walls miscellaneous objects were draped from pegs.

"Here!" said Achilea triumphantly. She rushed to a wall where her belt of tooled leather hung, her sword and dagger sheathed upon it. She snatched the belt down and fastened it about her sinewy waist, then crouched to examine the bundle of goods on the floor below the peg.

Conan found his own weapons nearby, hanging above a heap that contained his desert robes and miscellaneous belongings. He rolled everything except the weapon-belt into his cape and slung it all over his shoulder. The women were doing the same. They ignored the things that had belonged to Jeyba and Kye-Dee.

Something seemed to the Cimmerian to be missing. "Where are our camel saddles and harness?"

"Still on the camels, for aught I care," Achilea said. "I hope so. It will save us time getting away from this hideous place."

"Come!" Amram urged. "We have tarried here too long. The city will be waking soon and it will be time to change the guards at your cells. An alarm spreads through this city instantly!"

"I am ready," Conan said, striding out of the guardroom. "Now that we are armed, these degenerates had best not stand in our way!"

Up the great spiral and ramp they went, and as they did, they heard a loud commotion behind them. There was a thunder of gongs and a clanging of alarm bells and a shrill skirling of unearthly pipes.

"Too late, dogs!" Achilea cried. "We are out of your grasp now!"

"Do not speak presumptuously!" Amram warned. "The gods like nothing better than to punish mortals for making such pronouncements."

"Just now," said the Amazon, "I fear neither gods, men nor devils!"

Then they were in a huge, dim space where their voices and footsteps echoed. It was the interior of the immense idol within Janagar's greatest temple. The vapor torches still burned inside the immense bronze thing, their flames so low that only the vaguest shapes were visible above them.

"Where is that gate?" Achilea demanded.

"It is beneath the feet of the goddess," Amram said, rushing to the front of the chamber. "There are controls here somewhere." He jerked upon levers and there came to them a rattling of chains and a creaking of hinges. But the noise from behind them was already much louder.

"They come!" Payna cried. "Many of them!" The three women arranged themselves between the mouth of the ramp and their queen. Short swords and axes appeared in their hands as if by magick. Conan and Achilea drew their longer blades and set their feet, ready for anything.

"Hurry with that gate!" Conan shouted. "I'd rather deal with them outside than in this bronze tomb!"

Light blossomed within the idol as the torches flared, five-foot tongues of flame leaping from their cupped terminals. Someone below had turned up the vapor. Conan chanced a look overhead. There was always the possibility that enemies could lurk above, ready to drop upon them. He saw a maze of catwalks and ladders, chains hanging in great loops, levers and wheels and gears of unguessable function, but no living thing. Then something above caught his eye. It was a faint purple glow, one that he had seen before.

There was no further time for speculation. The guards had reached the end of the ramp. The Cimmerian darted around the queen's women and hacked at the first three to gain the top. Steel crunched through black armor and into flesh and bone. Taken aback, the three were easily overcome. Even as he hewed, he noted with relief that this was not the well-drilled team that had greeted their arrival with nets and lassos. They were merely the guards who had been first to answer the alarm, and they were all half-winded from the long ascent.

"Give me room!" Achilea demanded as she waded in, her blade whistling. Two guards rushed to meet her and fell back as swiftly, one with an arm slashed to the bone its whole length, the other pumping bright blood from a severed artery in his thigh. The wild women plied their shorter weapons with expert skill. The ramp grew slippery with blood, and for a moment the attackers withdrew in confusion.

Conan risked a glance over his shoulder and saw that Amram had the door open about a foot as he heaved at various levers and stole glances of his own at the skirmish behind him. He heaved once more and there was a mechanical clank. The door opened almost another foot. The Cimmerian made a note of which lever it was that the little man fought with.

"Go!" Conan shouted "Get through the door and I will hold diem here, men follow. Head for the great gate and our camels!"

"I'll not desert a fight!" Achilea barked at him, her face transported with battle-lust. "No man does my fighting for me!"

Conan turned to the other women, "Get your queen out of here!"

Dumbly, they nodded. Then all three laid hold of Achilea and began dragging her bodily away.

"Conan!" she cried. "You cannot stay them alone! They will kill you!"

"They want us alive, have you forgotten?" Truthfully, he was not certain of any such thing, Omia might want him alive, but she was nowhere to be seen and these guards might well have standing orders to kill any intruders. He saw the women hustle their chieftainess through the doorway. Amram was not in sight. Presumably, he had gone through first, exerting his customary care for his own hide. Then the Cimmerian had no attention to spare.

A guard larger than the others and more heavily armored came through the rabble of his fellows amid approving growls. Conan guessed that the local champion had arrived. The man wore a demon-faced mask and in his hands he cradled a mace with a flanged head. With a roar, he swung a full-armed blow at Conan's head. The Cimmerian ducked and replied with a horizontal slash, but the guard leapt back to avoid it and brought his own weapon down to block the tip. Blade and mace-shaft rang and sparked. Then the massive head of the weapon arced toward Conan's side, but the Cimmerian stepped within the man's swing and with one hand, grabbed the guard's arm below the elbow.

Conan's sword-hilt smashed into the guard's face, crumpling the thin metal of the mask, the blow so powerful that blood jetted from the eye-slits. The man howled and fell back and as he did, Conan plucked the mace from his grip. A whirling blow of the weapon smashed the guard's head and without

pause, Conan crushed another's side even as he ran his blade through the ribs of a third. The mob fell back in consternation and he spun and rushed for the gateway.

The guards gathered their nerve and pursued, but he was already at the gate. He did not go through though. Instead, he put his sword in his teeth and dropped the mace as he grasped the control lever and heaved. His muscles bulged as the lever groaned forward and the gate shut before him. Then he stooped, snatched up the mace and swung it in a terrific, horizontal circle. The iron lever, as thick as a man's wrist, snapped off at the floor and whizzed end over end through the air until it slammed into the bronze side of the hollow idol with a dull clang.

The guards stood gaping, unable to understand what had just happened. Then there was a commotion behind them and Omia appeared. Just behind her was Abbadas.

"What is this? Where—" Then she saw the Cimmerian grinning at her.

"You never raised bulls before, did you?" he taunted. "You'd have been more careful if you had. All cattlemen know that the best breeding stock is the most dangerous!"

"Where are those women?" Abbadas shouted.

"What care you?" Conan demanded. "You'll not live to touch them!" With the final word, he hurled the mace straight for Abbadas. He had never cared for the mace as a weapon and had taken it only so he could destroy the door control. With a squawk, Abbadas dodged in a move so swift that a tumbler might have envied it. Two men behind him went down with their faces pulped.

"Kill him!" Abbadas howled.

"No!" countered the queen. "I want him alive!"

But the object of their attention was not listening to them. With a fleet-footed spring, Conan dashed for the nearest ladder. With his sword between his teeth again, he sprang straight up and his hands grasped a rung fifteen feet from the floor. Instantly, he was swarming upward with the agility of a monkey. Below him, he heard the twang of a crossbow, and a quarrel whispered past his head to carom off a bronze plate. Omia squalled something. Apparently the shot had been made against her orders.

The ladder ended at a catwalk and he vaulted onto it. Close behind him climbed the guards. The ladder was bolted too firmly for him to dislodge it, and he had nothing to hurl down. He knew that he could stand where he was and lop their heads off all day as they reached the catwalk, but he was a clear target for archers, at least some of whom were following the orders of Abbadas.

"Come down!" Omia called, "You will not be harmed!" Ignoring her, Abbadas signaled to a pair of women who bore crossbows, and the strings twanged simultaneously. One fired a barb-headed quarrel, the other a wicked lead pellet that could crush a skull. The Cimmerian avoided both, but narrowly. Omia turned upon Abbadas. "You will die for this, traitor!"

"I think not," the man said. He stepped to Omia and seemed to embrace her tenderly. "Your timid rule is at an end, my queen. It is time for us to abandon the past and rejoin the real world."

"You are mad!" she cried, squirming in his arms. "We will all die! Janagar will be no more! You must not— Guards!" The last word was torn from her throat in horror as she saw the blade Abbadas held before her eyes. Then, so slowly that it might have been an act of love, he drew the keen edge across her throat. She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came forth save a great effusion of blood. She could grow no paler, but life left her eyes and she collapsed in a small heap at the feet of her murderer. The guards stood about, unable to absorb what had transpired.

"You will obey me now," Abbadas calmly announced to them. "I am the new king of Janagar. My first order to you as king is to slay that... where is he?" His gaze followed the direction of his own pointing finger, but the catwalk above was empty except for a guard who had just reached the top of the ladder.

When he saw the queen of Janagar die, Conan did not tarry. He had known many a throne to change hands with even less ceremony, and he knew that the new monarch was less tenderhearted than the last. At least, this one had no interest in keeping him alive. Quietly, the Cimmerian ran to the end of the catwalk and sprang upon its railing. Sheathing his sword, he jumped to another catwalk above, grasping a railing support and pulling himself over with the ease of one raised among cliffs and crags. No

mountain goat was as surefooted and agile as a Cimmerian.

"There he is!" shouted someone, and Conan dodged, knowing that crossbow bolts would soon follow. He took a run along the catwalk and sprang outward into empty space. He grasped a dangling chain and swung to a large platform crowded with gears and levers, doubtless a part of the controls of the idol's arms and other mobile features. He went to a corner of the platform and looked for a place to go next, balancing himself on the lip of the void, a hundred feet up. He had no fear of heights, an attribute the pursuing guards did not share, for they came with cautious deliberation.

But come they did. They were swarming up the ladders and catwalks, and in no great time, they would be upon the platform with him. He knew that even the greatest fighter must bow to superior numbers. Then he saw something above him. From his platform, a wobbly ladder of bars connected by a pair of cables stretched like a strand of spiderweb up into the darkness beyond. There, too far *from* the torchlight for him to make out any details, was a purple glow. In its center was a man-shape, and it seemed to be beckoning him.

Three bolts slammed into the platform beneath his feet. With no better prospects, he ventured out onto the uncertain ladder. He found it to be much like climbing the rigging of a ship, although no ship ever had a ladder so long. Bulls and quarrels sailed past him, but shooting from such an angle was a difficult task even for a good archer, and he suspected that these seldom got to practice their art at extreme range. He reflected that had there been pursuing Hyrkanians below him, he would by now bristle with arrows like a target at a village fair.

He could not tell where in the idol he was. The gloom enveloped the upper terminus of the ladder like a black shroud. But he could discern the faintly glowing shape of the homunculus. As much as he detested sorcery, the thing did not seem to be especially hostile, which could not be said of the people below.

Then his dark-adjusted eyes made out the bulk of another platform above him. It was only a lesser darkness in the gloom, but at least it proved that the ladder ended somewhere. No more than a score of rungs remained between himself and the platform when the ladder began to shake. Looking back, he could just make out the forms of masked guards upon the platform below as one of their number, braver than the others, ventured upon the ladder's uncertain footing.

A great metallic booming thundered through the hollow idol, accompanied by clashings and rattlings of metal. Far below him, they were striving to open the gate whose mechanism the Cimmerian had ruined. He laughed as he scrambled up the last rungs and gained the relatively more secure footing of the platform. By his calculation, if Achilea and the others had run at top speed and had not become lost in the city, they ought now to be at or near the opal-studded main gate of Janagar. His laugh cut off in the middle as the small platform lurched beneath his feet with a groan of tortured metal. His own weight and that of the guards upon the ladder below him had combined to tear the ancient, rickety structure loose from its moorings.

There came another lurch and a sound of corroded rivets snapping. The platform tilted, and the men on the ladder shouted in consternation. Conan looked about him for some means of escape. Could he fight his way back down the ladder, clearing it before the platform tore wholly from its feeble supports? The prospect seemed as unlikely as his chances of survival among the overwhelming odds below. Where had the damned homunculus gone?

Then he saw the purple glow again. The curved bronze wall before him, from which the platform was being torn at that very moment, featured a long, horizontal slit, and through this slit shone the light. Even as he looked, the tiny man-shape appeared in the slit and beckoned to him. He dashed for it as more rivets popped and the platform began to tear itself away from the wall with a metallic shriek that blended with the screams of the guards upon the ladder below.

The slit was barely wide enough to admit his head, but at the loss of some skin and hair, Conan thrust it somewhat apart as his hands gripped the lower edge and he cried to pull his body through. The slanting platform gave his feet little purchase, then none at all as, with a final screech of rending metal, it fell away completely, leaving his legs kicking futilely against empty air. The screams of the guards on the

ladder dwindled to silence as the Cimmerian struggled against the unyielding metal.

Slowly, with a scraping noise, the metal above him began to rise. Conan knew that even his great strength could not bend thick bronze. The section above him was hinged some how. From the noise it made, its mechanism had not been used in many years, perhaps not for eons. Painfully, he pulled his massive shoulders and chest through the opening. After that, the rest came easily. He slid through and came to rest, breathing heavily, upon a narrow, curving ledge. After a few deep breaths to restore his strength, he sat up carefully and surveyed his surroundings,

At first, all he could see was that he was very high up, near the domed ceiling of the temple. The exterior of the idol was a great bulk below him. As he looked down over the ledge, it diminished with a perspective that was dizzying even to his senses. He examined the tapering slit through which he had emerged and the domelike section he had raised for the purpose, then laughed. He had come out through one of the idol's eyes. The upper segment was a movable eyelid. Doubtless, in ages past, fires had burned within the head and the eyes would have been opened mechanically to suitably awesome effect.

He lay now upon one of the idol's cheekbones, and his first order of business was to get down to the ground somehow without breaking his neck, and hopefully before those below who thirsted for his blood managed to reopen the gate. The booming as they pounded at the portal resounded through the vast temple like the sound of an unthinkable huge gong. The homunculus was nowhere in sight, but after the gloom inside the idol, the interior of the temple was to his eyes as bright as daylight, and the uncanny little thing would be difficult to see under such conditions.

Directly below him there was nothing but a sheer drop of fifty feet or more to the jutting breast of the goddess, and even should he accomplish the span uninjured, the bronze hemisphere was so smooth that he would just slide off to his death upon the bronze lap, like some sort of belated sacrifice to a deity whose worshipers had long since abandoned her temple.

The ridge of the nose jutted forth from the face too far for him to lean around, so Conan went in the opposite direction and saw that the ear offered some possibilities. Its hollow was large enough to hold him, and the elongated lobe terminated in a dangling ornament that reached almost to the

The distance from the corner of the cheekbone to the ear was too great for him to clear in a single leap, but just above the ear, the hair of the goddess was formed by a mass of bronze rods *that*, looked as if they might support his weight. It was chancy, but his life had seldom been free from risk. The sound of the pounding below changed, as if the gate were beginning to give way.

Conan did not hesitate. He crouched deeply, then sprang out and upward. His hands grasped two of the bronze rods and he felt one of them give. He released it and reached for another even as the first broke and fell away. The curling rod clattered against the shoulder of the goddess and rebounded away to the floor below. Swiftly, he swung from one bronze tress to another, never letting one bear his weight long enough to break off and send him spinning to the unyielding surfaces below. Then he was in the ear and planning his next move.

The earlobe was narrow enough for him to grasp and slide down until he reached the dangling ornament, as large and elaborate as a chandelier in a Nemedian palace. This he descended as easily as if it were an oak tree, and from its terminus, it was no more than a short drop to the shoulder below. The arm was smooth, but what appeared to be a great string of beads crossed the shoulder and slanted across the body to the opposite hip.

Gripping the ornate carvings and raised decorations of the beads, Conan began to descend the ornament. The first part was easy going, but after the swell of the breast, he had to grip even more tightly as his own weight pulled at his fingers and his toes could gain little purchase. The gentle mounding of the belly was less arduous and soon he passed above the navel, which looked like the mouth of a cavern.

When he reached the slope of the hip, he slid down its rondure to the top of a huge thigh, thence down to its inner jointure with the body. Before him were the crossed ankles, and these he scrambled over and at last he was off the idol proper and atop its pedestal. Unhesitatingly, he leapt from the pedestal and landed on the floor, his knees bent to take up the shock.

His exultation in his feat was cut short as with a mighty crash, the gate was smashed open a few paces behind him and the guards came pouring out. Fleet as a mountain stag, Conan sped for the great door of the temple, hoping that they had not thought to bring any of the crossbowmen to the front as they stormed out of the interior.

Once away, he had little fear of being overtaken. He had never lost a footrace, and surely the underground world produced few trained runners. He sprinted toward the door in long-legged strides, and he heard crossbows snapping behind him, but the bolts flew wide and struck the walls or glanced off the floor. The doorway beckoned like a promise of relief, for sunlight streamed through it and he knew that the mob behind him abhorred sunlight the way other people detested pestilence.

He fairly flew through the door and into the wide plaza beyond. He laughed with triumph as he did so, but the laughter died in his throat as he saw what lay before him. Achilea and her three remaining followers, who should have been mounted on their camels and riding away from the city by now, stood with heads downcast and faces dejected. Behind them were ranged about a score of men, some of them desert dwellers, others foreign warriors. Before these, next to Achilea, stood two men Conan recognized.

"I take it that you are Conan of Cimmeria?" said the tall, lean man who wore a purple turban. "I believe you know my friend, Vladig." He gestured toward the man who stood beside him in red boots. Vladig saluted him with a sardonic smile.

"I am Arsaces, a mage of Qum, in Iranistan. It is good that you and I meet at last, for we have much to talk about." His hands were moving idly before his body, and Conan saw that he was pouring from one to the other a heap of glistening violet crystals.

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A man in a padded silken jacket lined with tiny steel plates took Conan's sword and dirk. The Cimmerian, in the midst of his consternation, made a mental note of the man's face, his accoutrements and the color of his armored jacket. He wanted to make sure to go for the right man when the time came to recover his weapons.

"Are you unharmed?" he asked Achilea, ignoring the wizard.

"You see us," she said. "We are well, if not at liberty. Conan, did you truly shut that gate behind us?"

"Aye," he admitted. "I wanted you to have a good head start. I thought you'd be away from the city by now."

"As you can see," she replied, "you need not have bothered." Despite the chagrin in her voice, he saw a new glow in her eyes as she regarded him. "I would have forbidden you to do it, had I known."

He smiled crookedly. "That is why I said nothing. I was in no mood for an argument."

"My heroic friends," Arsaces said quietly, "allow me to speak discourteously. You have had much time to converse together and can well afford to hold your tongues for a while. I, on the other hand, have business of vast importance in this place. You will come with me." He signed to his retinue and the four were hustled away, in a manner that Conan thought was becoming distressingly habitual. He looked back over his shoulder and saw a crowd of masked forms standing within the partly opened temple door. He thought he recognized Abbadas among them. He knew that they would come out at nightfall, but he saw no reason to apprise his latest captors of the fact.

"Where is Amram?" he muttered through the side of his mouth.

Achilea shrugged. "I did not see him after we left the temple. He is still in there, for aught I know."

Conan shook his head in wonderment. The man was as slippery as a greased eel.

Achilea looked up, "A few days ago, I'd not have believed that I would rejoice to see the sun again. The prospect of a life underground cured that. Even captive, it is like bairn to me."

"Quiet there!" Vladig said sternly.

"Be respectful of your betters, dog!" Achilea said with withering scorn. "Were you fit to kiss my feet, I would spit upon you."

Vladig snarled and snatched at his hilt, but Arsaces spoke a single word, very quietly: "Vladig."

Instantly the man calmed and turned his face from me prisoners. Conan and all four women chuckled at the man's discomfiture. It was small enough recompense for days of unremitting humiliation.

As they made their way through the mazelike city, Conan began to take note of the buildings around them and he noticed that something had changed. He nudged Achilea and jerked his chin upward, indicating the higher reaches of the buildings. These captors had not bound their hands, but he wanted to avoid obvious gestures. She looked upward and saw what he had seen.

When they had first come through the unthinkable ancient city, it had appeared as pristine as if it had never known occupants, Omia had told him that nocturnal maintenance crews had kept it that way since the inhabitants had abandoned it for their underground world. Now something had changed, The star, crescent and sunburst terminals atop many of the domes were gone, and the domes themselves had been damaged. Some had been partly smashed, as by sledgehammers, but others appeared to have been somehow *melted*. Their tops were gone, and stone, glass, ceramic and gilded bronze had been in some manner liquefied and had run down to congeal in glistening masses like hardened lava.

The desecration showed every sign of deliberation, as if someone were starting at the top and disassembling the city stone by stone, brick by brick, tile by tile. Demolition by hammer and crowbar he understood, but something that could melt the most unyielding of substances suggested things the Cimmerian preferred not to think about.

Payna nudged him and her queen as they passed an alley. Within it were bodies and shredded parts of bodies. The most complete specimens were clothed and masked like the inhabitants of the underground city. Some might have been slaves, but most were too mutilated to recognize. Conan has reminded of the massacred tribe whose remains they had found in the desert. An appalling charnel stench drifted from the alley and in any ordinary city, the air would have been vibrating with swarms of flies. This, Conan surmised, had been the previous night's maintenance crew, whose age-old task had conflicted with that of the demolishes.

They reached the city wall and found the great gate fully open. They passed through the found beyond it a camp set up near the water-trough, complete with tents. Many camels grazed upon the grass, and Conan could not tell which, if any, of them had been the mounts he, the women, the dwarf and the Hyrkanians had ridden into the desert. Nowhere did he see the tall, two-humped camels ridden by the twins.

They were conducted to the largest tent. In the desert fashion, three of its sides were raised, leaving only the canopy for shade and its back lowered to face the prevailing wind. Except. Conan reflected, that there was no wind in this uncanny place. Then, with a shock, he felt a faint breeze. He looked up and saw that the perfect bowl in which the city lay was no longer quite perfect. The lip of the crater showed dips and notches. Even as he watched, an errant gust blew sand over the rim and onto the interior slope.

"Be seated," said Arsaces, crossing his ankles and lowering himself onto a cushion. To the guards, he said, "Wait you a little way off. I wish private converse with these people."

"My lord—" Vladig began, but Arsaces cut him off.

"I shall be safe," said the wizard, his voice and his gaze so firm that the words could not be doubted. Vladig bowed, signaled to the others and walked off with ill grace.

Conan and Achilea sat facing Arsaces, separated from him by the distance of a pace. Achilea's women sat just behind her. Automatically, as if by long habit, Payna began to massage her queen's neck and shoulders.

"You people have caused me some little consternation," Arsaces began. "I came hither expecting a conflict of wizards and higher powers. I knew that there would be a retinue of guards, but I expected scum like those I myself hired." He nodded toward the rabble of desert men and warriors who sat some way off. Already the desert nomads had a fire of hoarded brush burning. They were brewing their inevitable-herb tea. Arsaces looked back at his involuntary guests. "I was not expecting a barbarian hero and an Amazon warrior-queen."

"Life is full of imponderables," said Achilea, as regal as if she were seated upon a throne surrounded

by perfumed courtiers.

The mage smiled grudgingly. "And who should know that better than a wizard? Even so, you may have been of service to me, albeit unknowingly."

"You called the sandstorm upon us!" Conan said, "And I've no doubt it was you who set the whirlwind-demons upon me!"

Arsaces regarded him blandly. "And wherefore not? You were spying upon my encampment. I do not take lightly such impertinences from the lower orders."

"My queen is not to be referred to thus!" said Payna, as proud as a duchess despite her ragged condition.

"Your queen is my prisoner. Be silent, woman."

Achilea patted Payna's hand. "Yes, my pet, be still. This fellow wants something from us and we must endure his lordly posturing until he informs us what it is."

The wizard's face reddened. Then he calmed himself with an effort. "For a start, I would know what transpired below."

"We've been running and fighting and climbing for what seems like hours," Conan said. "How about some food and drink before we get down to business? A real man of the desert would have offered refreshment even to prisoners beneath his tent."

"You are insolent beyond belief!" Arsaces snapped. "But then, I suppose that is to be expected from a barbarian!"

"Expect it from people of the north," Conan said. "We are not toadies and lickspittles like your followers out there." He jerked his touseled black mane toward the little group without.

Arsaces clapped his hands and shouted. Men came in and set before them food and drink: preserved travel rations and watered wine. When they had eaten, they sat back on their heels, ready to bargain.

"What would you know?" Conan asked. "You saw the fight with the crocodile, did you not? We saw your little crystal man down there. Is he not your eyes and ears?"

Arsaces smiled again. "You are less stupid than you appear, Cimmerian, Eyes only—alas. These crystals vibrate only in the plane of vision, not in that of hearing. Yes, I saw the battle, and it was most impressive. That was when I knew that the two of you were not persons of the common sort and that your presence here may not be entirely coincidental. So let us begin with how you came to be employed by my Adversary."

"You mean the twins?" Achilea asked.

"I mean my Adversary," he repeated firmly. "Tell me."

Thus Achilea told of how they had all met in the wretched outlaw village of Leng in the mountains of faraway Brythunia, and of how in their desperation they had agreed to accompany the mysterious twins on their madman's mission into the desert, and of how the twins had manifested uncanny powers in their travels through the lands in between.

Conan took up the tale and he spoke of the strange sights he had seen in the ruined temple in Zamora. Achilea looked at him sharply as he described the actions of the twins, and the majestic, white-bearded man upon the temple altar, and the utter silence that had enveloped all within the temple walls.

"You did not speak to me of this before," Achilea said accusingly.

"Sometimes it is wise to maintain silence," Conan said.

"Do not seek to hold secrets from me," warned the mage, "for I will unfailingly detect prevarication. Continue."

Conan spoke of their trek into the desert lands, the fight with the bandits and the discovery of the massacred tribe. "Were the bandits your hirelings?" Conan demanded.

The mage nodded. "Aye. It was a probing assault, intended to test your mettle and that of my

Adversary. You see, I have for long followed him from a great distance. Never before had I seen him or had the opportunity to contest powers with him."

"You keep speaking as if there were only one of them, not two," Achilea protested.

"All shall be made plain in time," he said. "That is, if I think you are worth the effort of explanation."

Seething, Conan told of the last stages of the journey, of his fight with the whirlwind-demons in the sandstorm, and of the terrible trek afoot in the desert that had almost been the death of Achilea. Throughout, the mage listened without comment or change of expression, his eyebrow quirking only when the Cimmerian described Arnram and the little chameleon's story. Conan almost thought he detected a smile upon the wizard's lips at this point in the tale; then it vanished.

Achilea resumed and told of their scaling of the gate and exploration of the city, hurrying through this part for she knew that it was not a matter of great importance. When she described their capture in the great temple, the wizard placed his palms upon his knees and leaned forward, listening intently. On the carpet before him, the little heap of violet crystal pulsed softly with its lifelike inner light

When they reached the point of Conan's interview with Omia, the Cimmerian resumed the recitation. He repeated Omia's tale of the history of Janagar, relaying her word for word, and the wizard nodded as it' what he heard was that which he expected.

Achilea finished with me story of their escape, telling of how Amram had released them and accompanied them as far as the temple, where they lost him. "The rest," she finished, "*I* take it you know already."

"All but one thing." He turned to Conan. "Did Abbadas truly slay Omia? My homunculus was so high up in the idol that I could not see clearly, and I have told you that it cannot relay sounds."

"He did," Conan affirmed. "Slit her throat as if it were a caress."

"Good riddance," said Achilea, her words echoed by a chorus of agreement from her women.

"You'd not say that if you'd seen it," Conan told her. "Abbadas is not truly human. But then, none of them are."

Now, Arsaces," he bent his sulfurous, blue-eyed gaze upon the wizard, "we have spoken true words to you, and we've done naught to threaten you. Will you in turn explain some things to us?"

"Very well. Know, then, that the tale of Janagar related to you by the late Queen Omia is true, at least insofar as she knew the tale. The epic of each nation is told as if that were the sole nation in all the world. But always there are others. So it was with Janagar. The empire of Janagar was great, but it contained city-states of a luster little dimmer than that of the queen city, and in the ages of misrule by the late priest-kings of Janagar, these cities grew restive, and they were fearful of the course taken by the overweening wizards. One of these was the city-state of Pulawar, which lay near what is now the northern border of Zamora."

"Where I saw the temple," Conan said.

Arsaces nodded. "That roofless hulk and its shattered tower are all that remain of magnificent Pulawar, which in its day rivaled Janagar herself in splendor, the most powerful of the mages of Pulawar formed the Guild of Murghal, named for the Powers they conversed with on the plane of such beings."

"Then others trafficked with these Powers?" Conan asked.

"Aye, they did, although unlike the mages of Janagar, they accomplished this without polluting themselves with nonhuman blood. The elder you saw in the temple was the last Master of the Guild. That is, you saw his specter, for he has been dead for eons."

The gaze of the mage's eyes grew fixed, as if he were in a trance. "Countless years have passed since the wizards of Janagar sought to save themselves with the Great Spell of Unchanging. The rival Guild of Pulawar sought to shut all the doors to the higher planes and then attempted the same spell, but they were not as accomplished in earthly magicks and Pulawar crumbled to the pathetic remnant you beheld. When they knew that they could not last, they set in place numerous safeguards. These were spells and writings that would appear, at least in fragmentary form, if the folly of Janagar should ever again threaten the world."

"Abbadas!" Conan said. "He spoke of rejoining the real world when he slew Omia."

"Once again your wit belies your appearance," said Arsaces. "He is the last descendant of the royal line of Janagar, and in him have been reborn the vaunting, blasphemous ambitions of the ancient wizards of that accursed nation. Years ago, he began to ponder the likelihood of restoring its fortunes, and from that moment, the ancient safeguards began appearing. Scholars discovered them, but so fragmentary were they that it took years and many consultations to piece together the story and decide what must be done about it. A few lone-wolf wizards of this decadent age sought to discover the city for themselves in hope of reaping its arcane riches, but most of them perished in the attempt."

"And the twins discovered some of these safeguard documents?" Achilea asked.

He shook his head. "No. They *are* one of the safeguards!"

"That is nonsense!" she protested.

"Is it?" queried the wizard. "You yourself noted their uncanny behavior—how they spoke as one person, how they never seemed to eat or drink."

"Aye," Conan said, "but how could—"

"Think!" snapped Arsaces. "Your own camels are out there with the herd. Did you see their strange beasts among them?"

"I did not," Conan admitted.

"That is because they were not camels, any more than your twins were human beings, in fact, what you accompanied hither was a single being that took the form of four—a man, a woman and two camels."

"It is not possible!" Achilea cried.

"And wherefore not?" the mage demanded. "What know you of beings from worlds beyond? When the safeguards reappeared, the creature was drawn from its proper plane to this. Its bulk is great, and there are reasons you would not understand why there must always be a balance between mass and energy. It could not reduce its size, but it has the power to subdivide itself, within limits. For purposes of credibility, it settled upon two humans and two beasts. We are accustomed to twins being closer to one another than other persons are. The twins and the camels made more sense than ten humans all acting exactly alike, do you not agree? Even then, it was not capable of wholly human behavior." His hearers were by now beyond astonishment.

"You call it your Adversary," Conan said. "Why?"

"It is here to destroy Janagar," he answered.

"And so, it seems, are you," the Cimmerian countered. "Why are you not allies instead?"

"Because we seek to destroy the city for differing reasons. It wishes to throw open the last gate and admit the Powers to our world. I seek to shut it forever. You see, none of the wizards of ancient days, not those of Janagar or those of Pulawar, understood the nature of the Powers. They have been the subject of ages of study by the highest scholars of the thaumaturgic arts in the time since, and all now know that they are not to be trifled with, they cannot be dealt with in any fashion possible to humans, nor even to half-humans such as those ancient wizards of Janagar.

"The thaumaturges of Pulawar called their Power 'Murghal'—although actually the Powers have no names in the human sense—and they thought it to be beneficent. They were wrong. They had merely not yet attracted from it something they would recognize as hostility. But in truth, the Powers are hostile to all things, including each other. They fight and devour one another continually, in their last contact with Murghal, the Guild obtained from it the creature you knew as the twins. It arrived in this world ignorant and unaware of how to locate the well-hidden city of Janagar. It had to search, like the rest of us."

"Why did a creature like that need guards?" Achilea asked.

"In this world, it is vulnerable. It needs much of its strength just to maintain its spurious appearance. Also, it strove for a realistic appearance, and scholarly, well-born folk would never travel in the wild lands without an escort."

"The whirlwind-demons seem to be at your command," said Conan, "yet they also seem to figure in the ancient tale of Janagar. How is this?"

"They, like my Adversary, are another of the safeguards. They have lain buried deep beneath the sands of the deserts since the fall of Janagar, but a few times since, one or two have been accidentally called to the surface to ravage and destroy, thus the legends among the desert nomads. The demons stirred when the other safeguards were activated, and have grown active in recent months. They are unintelligent and un-discriminating without guidance, hence that massacred tribe you came upon. There have probably been others.

"Incidentally," he said with a look of frosty approval, "it is a great feat to kill one. For a lone man to fight two in the dark and to slay one and severely wound the other ... that is the work of a true hero. One of the safeguard fragments contained their leash-spell, and I control them now. They can do more than kill. Their claws can tear apart stone, and the acid fluids of their bodies are capable of dissolving not only stone, but metal and glass as well. My scum out there," he gestured contemptuously toward his escort, "are good for killing, but they abhor hard work. The whirlwind-demons can function only in the dark, so they rend the city to pieces at night."

"How long will they need to complete the work?" Conan asked.

"Not long. It will not be necessary to demolish the city utterly, just enough to break the Spell of Unchanging. Already it is seriously weakened."

"A moment," Achilea said. "When we found Amram, or rather, when he found us, he spoke of a wizard named Firagi whom he had led hither. Was this just another of his lies?"

Again they saw that hint of amusement. "Nothing he says is an utter lie, and he is never to be believed utterly. The man you know as Amram is the wizard Firagi."

"Crom!" Conan said in exasperation. "Is nothing here ever as it seems? I had rated myself a good judge of men, and I would have sworn that he was a runaway slave, an unhung rogue, from Koth!"

"He is that indeed, and many other things. You recall that I spoke of lone-wolf wizards who sought Janagar on their own? Firagi was one of them. In his checkered career, he was once the salve of a Stygian wizard, and from him he learned some of the thaumaturgic arts. He has a nimble mind and a knack for taking on roles. For many years, he has been a gadfly wizard, almost an outlaw among us, save that we have no laws. He is tolerated among the fraternity because he is amusing and sometimes he is useful. A genuine rogue can oft discern possibilities where a traditional mage is stymied.

"At any rate, Firagi-Amram found one of the very first fragments to appear on an engraved vessel dredged up in the net of some lake-fisherman in Keshan five years ago. He bought it, hid and deciphered it, and it turned out to contain one of the best descriptions of Janagar and its location. By the time it came into the hands of the fraternity and was pooled with the other information we had, he was well on his way."

"Why did he not keep or destroy it?" Achilea asked.

"That he could not do. These fragments are swathed in the most powerful spells. He could not bear its proximity for long, and he abandoned the thing in the wilderness once he had plumbed its secrets. In the fashion of such objects, it was found within days and soon rested in the hands of the fraternity."

"What is this fraternity?" Conan asked.

"There is a sort of loose brotherhood among the masters of the thaumaturgic arts. We usually toil alone and often we are at odds, but in matters of very great peril, we cooperate and pool our knowledge. This we call the fraternity, and many of us have been at work on this problem since the safeguards were activated. Almost all that is known about Janagar is the product of our researches since that time, I was chosen to represent the brotherhood all during the final stage of the Sealing of Janagar, not because I am the greatest, far from it, but because I am unknown in the lands roundabout.

"Now I arrive to find that not only has my Adversary preceded me, but Firagi has been here for a long time. In his customary fashion, he turned his situation to good account. He was captured and soon won himself a place as counselor to Omia and Abbadas. He probably instructed them on the nature of the world outside the desert. Doubtless this further inflamed the ambitions of Abbadas. By my arts, I can also detect that they used him for the same purpose they had intended for you."

"Crom!" Conan said. "They *must* have been desperate for breeding stock!"

"Why did he guide the twins—your Adversary—to the city?" Achilea asked.

"He may have had little choice. He was never much of a wizard, as I have intimated. He was probably sent out by Queen Omia to lure wayfarers into the city. They must have had their ways of knowing when any such were nigh. He could not have known what the Adversary was, although he surely would have understood that he did not conduct a pair of ordinary twins and their camels. And, as always, he was playing some game of his own. It is probably as crackbrained as all his doings."

"And you've no idea where your Adversary is?" Conan asked.

"None. Two years ago, I would have known where to look for it, but it has learned much of the arts and is now adept at concealing itself. When you see it again, I doubt that it will look like your twins. Or their camels, for that matter."

"What!" Conan barked. "Why should we ever lay eyes upon it again? I, for one, intend to go and mount my camel and ride away from here. I am heartily sick of this place and all its doings, and am willing to take my chances with the desert!"

"You forget that you are unarmed in the midst of my men," Arsaces snapped. Conan bristled, but Achilea put a hand on his arm.

"I think we are about to hear what he wants of us," she said.

"What is it?" Conan demanded sullenly.

"Surely you have guessed by now," Arsaces said. "I want you to go back into the underground city."

Fifteen

The desert sun lowered, touched the western horizon and began to disappear beneath it. Conan stood upon the rim of the great sand bowl, his eyes taking in its slow demise. The once-perfect contours of the basin had grown ragged as wind and gravity caused sand to sink from the rim into the depression. Soon it would be night and time for the whirlwind-demons to resume their work. He knew that on this night, the proceedings would be different, and undoubtedly a good deal livelier. Below him, he saw Achilea climbing up the face of the bowl-dune with her usual limber, long-legged strides. Soon she stood beside him. Half the globe of the sun was below the horizon.

"It will be time ere long," she said, the red blaze from the west illuminating her richly, her long, tawny hair streaming in the evening wind. "If this is the last sunset I am to see, at least it is a fair one."

"I do not like this," Conan said. "I care nothing for these wizards and their doings. They have our weapons, but I've been without a sword ere now. I am willing to chance the desert. What say you? Just you and I?"

She smiled wanly and shook her head. "Nay, I remember last time too well. I'll not venture out again upon those sands without good robes and a mount, even if it must be a smelly camel. And I could never desert my followers, few as they are."

"I suppose that is wisest. Well, we've come out of that city alive once. Perhaps we can do it again." As always, he detested not being his own master.

"Conan," she said, "have you not wondered how I came to Jose my throne?"

This was something unexpected. "Aye, that I have."

"You have heard the tales of how my nation propagates itself? How we take captive men and keep them only long enough to breed children with us?"

"I have heard this," he admitted.

"It is true. Not long after I was made queen, we had such a ceremony. I chose carefully from among our captives. He was an Aesir youth, a wandering adventurer like you, but with sun-colored hair and a laughing mouth and merry eyes, unlike your sour Cimmerian visage." She smiled at his look of consternation. "We were together for the stipulated month, and in that time, I conceived a love for him that surpassed anything I had ever felt before."

"That was unfortunate," Conan said, "since you had to slay him at the end of it."

"That was my first sin," she told him. "His name was Aethelwulf, and I could not bear the thought that he would be no more. So before the crone could cut his throat upon the great stone of sacrifice, I stole into the prison cave, knocked his guard unconscious and cut his bonds. I never saw him again and I was not seen doing it, but suspicion fell upon me anyway. It was my sister, Briseis, who began the rumors. They haunted me for months. It was said that Achilea was too tenderhearted to be queen, that she had defied the gods of our people."

Conan loosed an honest laugh. "I think that only your tribe or a barbarian like me could ever consider you tenderhearted!"

"Whatever the case, it was just the beginning. In time, I was brought to the birthing-chair to deliver my child."

Conan thought he knew what was coming, but he said nothing. Now only a sliver of the sun remained above the horizon.

"The child was male. The time of year was a bad one; there would be no passing caravan to take it and the other males off our hands, so it was sent to the House of the Crones to be slain after the ancient custom. I could not stand the thought. I rose from the birth ing-chair and fought my way through the midwives and snatched up my sword. Somehow I found the strength to stagger to the House of the Crones and there I found the eldest sister with her blade poised above the babe's throat. I hewed her gray head from her shoulders. Then I slew the other crones and I took up the babe.

"Outside, I ran to my horse. All the others stood out of my way, for I was a sight to horrify a dragon! I rode to the crest of a hill near the village, and below me, I saw my sister rousing the others to pursue, flogging laggards with her whip. I raised the child above my head and screamed defiance at her. Then I rode away,

"For months, I lived alone as an animal, nursing my child and living by my skills as a hunter. Then my sisters of my wilderness year found me. They were sick of Briseis and would rather follow me as outlaws. There were a score of them then. Lombi, Payna and Ekun are all that survive. So now you know. Even Jeyba, who was closer to me than any other man since Aethelwulf, never knew the whole story."

"What became of the bairn?" Conan asked.

"It was not a life an infant could survive," she said. "I gave him to a family of hunters in the mountains and visited him from time to time over the years, I named him Wulf for his father, since we have no male names among my people. He is about twelve years old now, if he lives. Time to begin his warrior training."

Conan was silent for a minute. Then: "Achilea, you are the greatest woman I have ever known. Not just great in size and strength and courage, but in heart. You are the only true queen I have ever known, and ere now, I have known women who sat upon thrones. Had I been Aethelwulf, I would have fought your whole nation to keep you."

She smiled, leaned forward, and their lips met. He crushed her to him, and her own arms, scarcely less powerful than his, returned the embrace. If tigers kissed, it would have been like the kiss of the Amazon and the Cimmerian. Then they broke apart.

"Come," she said. "Let us get our weapons and go die together." She sounded truly happy. The last sliver of sun disappeared beneath the horizon.

They entered the city with their swords bare in their hands. Conan and Achilea were in the lead, with the three wild women close behind. Well behind them followed men of Arsaces, nervous but ready with sword, bow and crossbow. Last of all came Arsaces himself, with his crystalline homunculus perched upon his shoulder like a pet bird.

"A slow and cautious man, our Arsaces," Conan said with a wolfish scowl.

"It is doubtless the best course when dealing with the foes he faces," Achilea said, "Give me clean bloodshed and bare steel any time."

"Aye, I— What is that?" There was a rustling, flapping noise all around them. The Cimmerian halted.

"It is just the whirlwind-demons beginning their night's work," Arsaces shouted from behind them. "Pay them no mind and proceed."

Proceed they did, but as for ignoring the demons, that was impossible. There came sounds of stone being rent and broken, glass being shattered, and an indescribable hissing noise. Dominating all was a choking stench of acid that soon had them coughing as a yellow fog came rolling down the walls of the high buildings, behaving more like a thin liquid than proper smoke. It formed an ankle-high layer upon the street, and the skin of their feet began to sting and burn.

"Crom, let's get out of this!" Conan said, sprinting for the nearest stairway. Achilea and her women ran like fallow deer and the warriors shuffled along behind, lumbered by their armor and desert robes. The wizard strode along in a dignified manner, ignoring all discomfort.

In the higher elevations of the city, the air was still clear. Soon they were at the great plaza before the temple. The temple door stood open and they could see lights flickering within.

"We'll have company soon," Conan said. "Are you ready?"

"I am always ready," Achilea said, her long fingers flexing on the rough grip of her sword. Behind them, the hired warriors waited, and atop the buildings that fringed the plaza, other creatures gathered.

"I hate the idea of fighting on the same side as those things," the Cimmerian muttered.

"When you are gravely outnumbered," Achilea pointed out, "you cannot be picky about your allies."

"Let's go," Conan said. The time for hesitation was past. For good or ill, it was time to commence the night's work. They had gone no more than a dozen paces when warriors came boiling from within the temple. The shouted and gave voice to hideous, ululating war cries, and the air began to hum with crossbow bolts, few of which found targets in the uncertain light. Many of the underground warriors waved torches and these produced a multitude of shifting shadows, further confusing the sight.

The first warriors to reach the Cimmerian and the Amazon queen went down amid screams and blood. The hired warriors spread out and made their weapons felt. The underground folk were smaller and at a disadvantage in a hand-to-hand encounter, but their numbers were overwhelming. Two of Arsaces's warriors went down screaming and another fell soundlessly, a bolt protruding from an eye socket. Then the whirlwind-demons joined the fray.

Conan had fought his way within twenty paces of the temple door when they were surrounded by reeking, flapping, shadowy forms. The Cimmerian could not discern clearly what they looked like, and he was not certain that he wanted to. Within moments, he was being showered by bloody offal that had been shredded by no weapon of steel. The masked warriors fell back in panic-stricken horror and Conan and his companions hewed at their bare backs. This was a desperate fight against overwhelming odds, and there was no place for the niceties of chivalry.

Inside the temple, vapor torches burned in sconces, and huge flames leapt from the upturned hands of the bronze goddess. Standing before the gate to the underworld, Conan saw Abbadas, shouting and haranguing his warriors. His voice betrayed growing fear and panic.

"No! Get back out there, you worms! They are destroying the city and it is not time yet! The Great Spell of Unchanging must be maintained for a while longer!" His words went unheard, for the invading warriors and the whirlwind-demons were already within the temple.

But now the tide of the fight began to shift and resistance stiffened, for the demons could not abide the light of the torches and must perforce lurk within the shadows, snatching at masked guards as they chanced too close. Even so, the panic spread by their presence and, most of all, by their acid stench, prevented any genuine rallying on the part of the underground people. Some tried to run past Abbadas for whatever refuge the lower city had to offer, but he cut down many with his sword and flogged the others back into the fray with a short, thick whip.

"Back, cowards!" he cried. "We are safe as long as the fires burn high!" Under his repeated shriekings and scourging, the masked warriors formed a thick cordon beneath the feet of the gigantic

idol, thus blocking the door. Conan, Achilea and the few remaining hired warriors carved at the line, inflicting casualties, but there were always oncoming warriors to take the places of the fallen. The battle seemed about to reach a stalemate when a new and horrifying factor entered.

The Adversary dropped from its lurking place at the top of the dome.

Screams of surprise and terror greeted its arrival and for a few paralyzed seconds, the Cimmerian gaped at the thing that he had known as the twins Yolanthe and Monandas and their two unusual camels. Now it had reverted to the shape natural to it in its own plane. He judged it to mass at least a ton. It was roughly circular, covered with coarse, bristling hair and fringed at its base with short tentacles that glowed crimson and green. It had six long, jointed arms tipped with hooked pincers. Most frightening of all were its eyes. Glaring and slit-pupiled, the three orbs atop the blasphemous form glowed with a hideous intelligence that made the mindless whirlwind-demons seem innocuous by contrast.

For long, tense seconds, the mass of struggling humans stood still and silent, stunned with horror at this new apparition. The tension was shattered when the six long, hairy arms shot out with unnatural swiftness and snatched up six squirming, writhing humans. The pincers pulped diem, and six vertical orifices, lined with curved, thornlike teeth, gaped open upon the body between the arms. The pincers thrust the shredded bodies into the mouths. The orifices closed and the Adversary began, hideously, to grow,

The voice of Arsaces rose, thundering above the din of the resumed battle, and violet light began to flash around him.

Suddenly, the underground city seemed to Conan to be a good place to visit. With near-maniacal fury, he began to hew at the line before him, his sword a glittering whirlwind that made even lionhearted Achilea stand back in awe of his savagery. Then he was distracted by a blood-chilling scream.

"My queen!"

Conan whirled, and a wave of horror rushed over him. One of the pincers had grasped Ekun and begun to raise her from the floor. Even in the din of battle and panic, he distinctly heard the thick bones of her pelvis snap in the merciless grip.

Without the slightest hesitation, Achilea spun on a bare heel and thrust her sword unerringly through the suffering woman's heart. "Die clean, my sister!" Her reward was a look of unutterable gratitude that quickly faded. Ekun was dead before her queen's steel left her heart. With two fingers of her left hand, Achilea wiped the woman's blood from the tip of her blade and drew a red line from her hairline to her lips. Payna and Lombi reached out to touch the blade and performed the same gesture,

The monstrous thing lurched higher, newly fed upon human flesh. Then it was enveloped in a violet net as Arsaces flung his handful of crystals over it. The stones darted about like glittering wasps, trailing glowing strands of light. The stumpy tentacles flashed multiple colors, some of them painful for human eyes to behold, as the creature left off devouring human prey to fight its wizardly enemy.

Conan wanted to see no more. He returned to the fray with redoubled fury. In moments, he and Achilea had carved a path through the resisting warriors and were within the idol. Payna and Lombi were close behind. The hired warriors were all dead or had fled, they knew not which. With a last few killing blows, the way to the spiral ramp was open. They ran for it, every stride putting more distance between themselves and the horrors behind.

"Abbas!" Conan shouted as they ran down the spiral. "Where are you? Come meet me, dog! See if I die as easily as your murdered queen!" Nothing answered him save his own echo.

Minutes later, they were in the underground warren off the main corridor. With his unerring memory, the Cimmerian guided them through the pathways they had taken in their escape from the city. They passed many inhabitants, but these drew aside with fear. All the warriors were above, either fighting or dead.

"Which way?" Achilea cried as they came to a fork in the passages.

"Here!" Conan said, taking the one that led to the right. From before them came creaking, groaning and hissing sounds. A hundred long strides later, they passed through a doorway and into the

vapor-works. First Conan darted within, closely followed by Achilea. Payna was after her queen, and last was Lombi. At Lombi's sudden gasp, they rushed to see her standing with a stunned expression, looking down at the foot of bloody steel that had suddenly appeared from between her breasts. The blade withdrew and the light in her eyes faded. Stiff-legged, she toppled like a falling tree. Behind her stood Abbadas, holding a stained sword.

The usurper's mask was off for a change, revealing a hard-planed face whose contours were not quite human. Upon it sat a look of sensual satisfaction as he dabbled his fingers in the blood coating his blade. He raised his wet fingertips to his tongue and licked them, managing to smile at the surviving three while he did so.

"Dog-spawn!" Conan snarled, making for him. He was stopped by a gesture from Achilea.

"Mine," was all she said, but she put so much queenly authority into her voice that the berserk Cimmerian and the furious warrior-woman Payna were stopped in their tracks. With leonine tread, Achilea walked toward Abbadas, and as she did, she idly tossed her bloody sword back over her shoulder. It spun end over end and Payna caught it on the fly, as if by long practice.

"Good steel is wasted on the likes of you, you loathsome little wretch!" she said with withering contempt.

Abbadas giggled insanely. "Die however you want, big woman!" He came for her, putting all his strength into an overhand slash intended to open her from shoulder to hip.

Achilea's big-knuckled left hand took him by the wrist and stopped the whistling blade cold. The reptilian eyes bulged with amazement, but he had little leisure in which to appreciate her strength as her right forearm swept across the bend of his elbow and her right hand grasped her own forearm as her long right leg swept around behind his body.

With all the power of her arms, shoulders and back, Achilea bent forward, using the usurper's own forearm as a lever and his elbow as a fulcrum. Had he been able to fall to the floor swiftly enough, he might have bought himself a second's respite in which to take action, but her steely thigh was behind him, preventing just that. With a sickening series of sounds, the bones of his forearm gave way, his elbow was wrenched apart, his upper arm was torn from his socket as its bone snapped in the middle.

Abbadas screamed and as he did, his left hand snatched his dagger from its sheath at his belt. The deadly steel lanced toward her flank, but her right hand, released from its task, snapped down and took his wrist with an audible smack just as the keen point indented the flesh above her right hip.

His useless right arm flopped to his side as her left hand went around his neck, and with a surge of brute strength, she lifted him from the floor, bringing his face within inches for her own. She smiled at him ferociously as she squeezed. His eyes bulged yet farther and began to turn red as blood sprang first from his ears, then from his nostrils and mouth. The dagger fell from his nerveless fingers and there were several very faint, popping noises. She dropped the corpse to the floor at her feet, where, like a beheaded snake, it quivered and flopped for a while as foamy blood bubbled from its mouth, propelled by the last wind from its dying lungs.

Conan whistled in appreciation at the feat. "Crom, woman! Remind me never to get on your bad side!"

She ignored the comment and walked to the body of Lombi. There she knelt and placed her fingers in the corpse's blood and then drew another line beside the first on her face. Payna repeated the ritual.

Conan cut a scrap of cloth from the clothing of the dead Abbadas and wiped his blade, then resheathed it. Looking around him, he saw that all the workmen and slaves had fled the vapor-works save the hulking, tiny-headed slaves, who stood about with their mouths open, lacking anyone to tell them what to do.

He found the great master wheel, its six slaves standing slack in their chains. "Turn this thing!" he ordered. They stared at him, no slightest glimmer of comprehension in their eyes.

"Crom and Llyr and all their brood!" he swore, laying his own hands to the wheel and wrenching at it. Achilea and Payna joined him and added their efforts. All their strength would not budge it.

"May I be of assistance?"

Conan turned to see Amram standing near, his hands clasped behind him and an expression of studious innocence upon his face. "I was wondering when you would show up," he said.

"May I inquire why you do this?" asked Amram.

"We have been so instructed by a wizard named Arsaces, who even now battles something above that he calls the Adversary," Conan replied, jabbing a thick finger upward.

"Arsaces!" the small man said, wincing. "That is one I would rather not meet just now."

"You need not," Conan said. "Just get these slaves to shut off the vapor to the city."

"Very well." The little man spoke a few odd-sounding words and the slaves put their malformed hands to the spokes and began to push. Clearly, the wheel was seldom turned, for it squealed in protest as it began to move. The slaves plodded like sailors hauling up an anchor with a ship's capstan, and slowly the constant hissing of the vapor-works began to subside. In a few minutes, it ceased entirely.

"Good," Conan announced. "Now tell them to break it"

"I beg your pardon?" Amram said politely.

"Tell them to break the wheel, Set curse you!" barked the Cimmerian. "I want this machine disabled!"

"You needn't shout," sniffed the little man. "Clear instructions will suffice," He spoke further words in the same language as before. Stolidly, the slaves shuffled to one side of the wheel, as far as their chains would allow, and they put their shoulders beneath it and strained upward with their massive legs and backs. With a screech of tortured metal, the great wheel began to tilt. Then it snapped from its shaft and clanged to the stone floor.

"Will that be satisfactory?" Amram inquired.

"It is what Arsaces wanted," Conan told him. "Now the whirlwind-demons can come down here and destroy the underground city."

Amram closed his eyes and seemed to be having trouble swallowing some large object. "The whirlwind-demons, you say?" he said at last, his voice trembling. "We cannot stay here!"

"And it is a cursed certainty we cannot go back up!" Conan said. "Not to the horror we left above in the temple!"

"And I am heartily sick of the desert!" Achilea said, towering over the chameleon wizard. "So, Amram, or Firagi, or whatever you name is, guide us to me river!"

"Yes," he said, one hand kneading the other. "Yes, I think that would be the best idea all around. But to destroy this marvelous ancient city, with all its riches, all its secrets! What 'a loss!"

"It should have died ages ago," said Conan, "Forget about it and lead on."

"Follow me, then," Amram said. They trailed after him and as they hurried through the dimmed city, he wailed his woeful displeasure. "Five years I have worked toward this! It was to have made me rich beyond the wildest imaginings of a miser. The lore of Janagar would have catapulted me to the highest order of mages!"

"Where the *real* wizards would have promptly taken everything you had and cast you down again," Achilea said scornfully.

"Besides," Conan added, "you haven't done badly out of this for a runaway Kothian slave." He tapped the bulging sack that depended from Amram's girdle. "You seem to have acquired some valuables during your stay."

"A few baubles, yes," said the little man, shrugging. "Perhaps enough for a little stake to get me started again, after all this sacrifice."

"If those are opals," Conan said meaningfully, "you are set for life."

"Surely you would not deprive me of this small satisfaction?"

Conan laughed "No, all I want just now is that river."

They passed through the darkened city, seeing only by the dim, uncertain light of small clusters and

lines of glowing fungus. The people of the city crouched in huddled groups, wailing in their fear of the doom that had come upon their ancient domain.

"Out!" Conan shouted at them. "If any of you has the spirit to live, get to the river. Janagar is no more!" None of them paid him the slightest attention.

The river-smell grew ever stronger, and at last they followed Amram to a gigantic natural cavern where black water flowed along in a broad, slow stream. By the light of great, globular clusters of glowing fungus, they saw a rough stone jetty to which was tied a long raft of logs with a rude brush hut erected in its center. To the raft was lashed a large dugout canoe. Upon the raft stood four tiny brown men who began to gesticulate wildly and chatter questions at the newcomers.

The river-folk," Amram informed his companions. "They are puzzled by the commotion and the extinguishing of the torches. I fear I must tell them that their age-old trade with Janagar is at an end. No, perhaps I shall wait until we are well away from here," He began to converse with the tiny men in a language Conan did not understand. Soon they quieted.

"Where does the river lead?" Conan demanded

"This is a loop that branches from the Styx," Amram told him. He pointed to his left. "Upstream, where the villagers live, it passes beneath a mountain range and emerges almost at the boundary between Punt and Keshan." He pointed to his right, "Downstream, it rejoins the Styx near the great bend, with Stygia on the southern bank and land claimed by Shem to the north. The villagers come here, trade their wares, including the timber of the raft, and paddle back home in the dugout. I am about to take passage with them, to return to my home in Keshan. I think the canoe is large enough to hold all of us"

"Nay," said Conan. "We will take the raft. I'll wager there is a war in Shem, where a good fighting-man can make his way with a sword and a stout heart" He cocked an eyebrow toward Achilea and she smiled.

"Aye, just now I've no urge to see the dark and jungled lands. I'm for the raft," she declared.

"Then farewell, my friends," Amram said, stepping into the dugout. "In three days, you should see the sunlight again." He shook his head. "With all the fools, knaves and cowards in the world, why did I have to encounter a pair of genuine heroes?"

"Your gods do not love you, Amram," Conan said. "But may they watch over you anyway. Farewell." The brown men climbed into the dugout and took up their paddles. Minutes later, they were out of sight.

"Let's be off," Conan said. They stepped aboard the raft and while the women took up poles, Conan drew his sword and slashed through the ropes that bound the float to the jetty fore and aft. Putting their shoulders to the poles, they pushed themselves to midstream; then they laid the poles aside as the current carried them downstream. Gradually, the sounds of the city faded behind them. They soon were out of the great cavern and in a cave that was narrower, but still spacious. Overhead, the glowing fungus began to thin out.

At the stern of the raft was an earth-filled firebox and a stack of wood. With flint and steel, the Cimmerian struck a light and soon had a small fire burning. The smoky, orange flames seemed decidedly clean after the unnatural lighting of the underground city. Achilea came to stand beside him.

"Payna," she said, "tend the fire. Should the raft drift too close to a wall, fend it off with one of the poles. Conan and I have matters to attend to in the hut here. Do not disturb us."

Payna looked the Cimmerian up and down without favor. Then she delivered the longest speech he had heard pass her lips. "My queen, I honor this great, ugly beast for the services he has done you, but as I have said to you before, you are far too soft where men are concerned."

They went into the little hut. It was crude and unfurnished, but they cared nothing for that Achilea unbuckled her sword-belt and her weapons fell to the logs along with his. She tugged at the thongs fastening her skimpy garments.

"Three days," she said. "How much can we accomplish in three days?"

"More than any ordinary man and woman," he replied, performing the same actions. "As Amram

said, we are heroes!" Then they lunged for each other like mating tigers.

The three stood on the northern riverbank and watched the raft float downstream toward the Western Sea. The Cimmerian stretched his mighty arms, exulting in open, clean air and sunshine that was not the brutal glare of the desert. To the south, they could just discern a pyramid where some forgotten king of Stygia was entombed. To the north, east and west, grassland extended to the limit of vision.

"Let's go that way," Conan said, pointing westward. "If we don't find a war before long, I don't know Shem."

"No," Achilea said with a sad sigh. "I go that way." She pointed to the north.

"Why?" Conan asked, astonished. "What is up there? "

"My homeland. I want to see my son once more. And I want my throne back. I will go and fight Briseis. All my wilderness sisters save Payna are dead now because of her. It is time for her to die."

He stood as if thunderstruck. "Very well then, I will help you."

She shook her head. "No, Conan, it is hopeless. When I am queen again, there will be no place for a man at my side." She smiled wanly. "We could not be together for long; you know that as well as I do. We are heroes, and two such cannot live beneath the same roof. We would be at each other's throats before the turning of a year. Farewell, Cimmerian." She leaned forward, kissed him lightly, men turned and began to walk northward, her last follower close behind her.

Conan stood watching as the two forms dwindled with distance and vanished from sight. "Farewell, my queen," he whispered at last. With a grim expression on his craggy features, he turned and strode west. Far behind him, the eternal sands of the desert buried the shattered ruins of Janagar of the Opal Gates.

End