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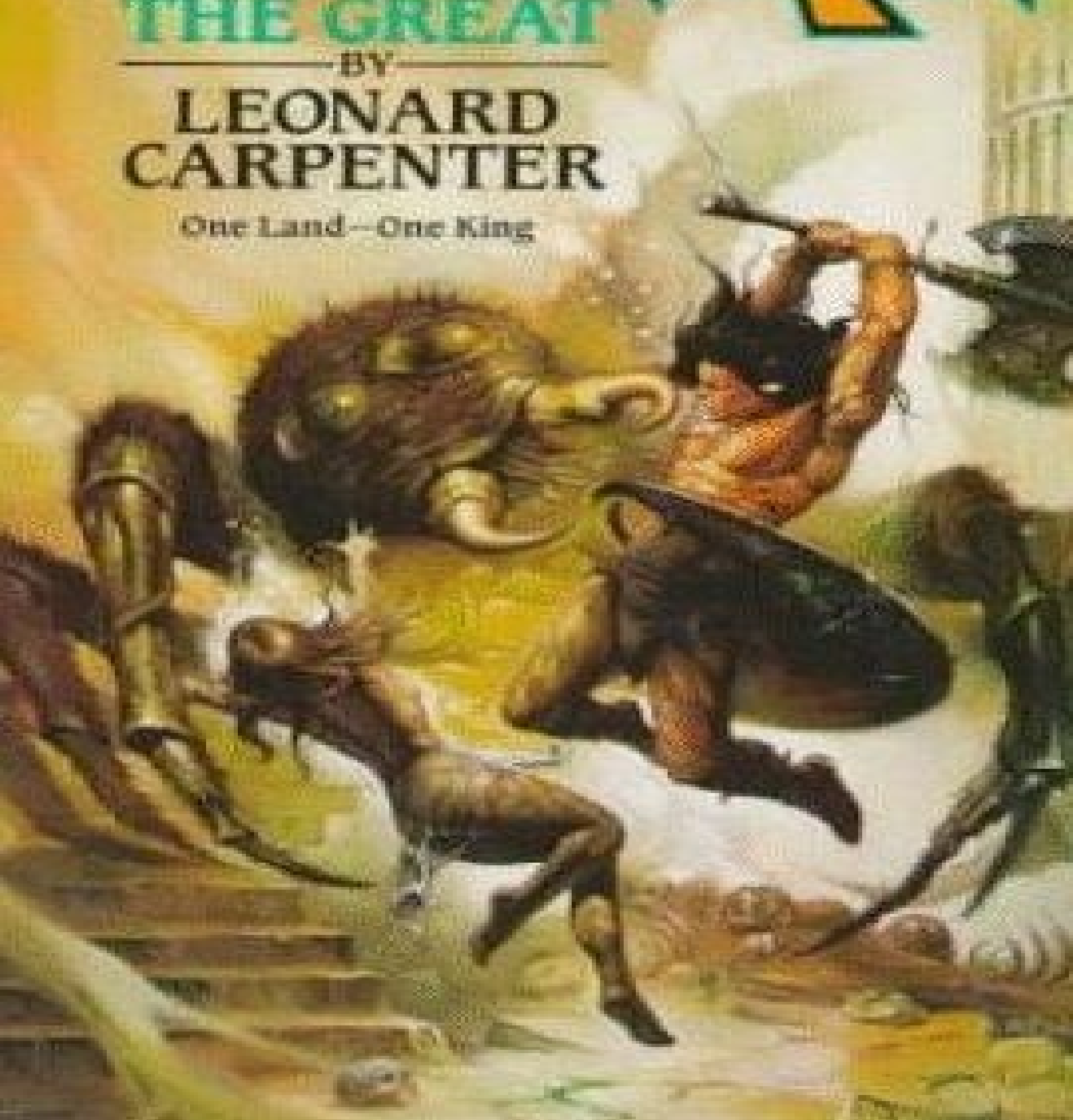
CONAN

THE GREAT

—BY—

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One Land—One King



Victory

The Tybor plain stretched level, its grass sheened a dewy, dazzling emerald in the morning sun. Set amid the Hyborian kingdoms of Aquilonia, Nemedia, and Ophir, ever had it made an easy, dangerous route between the three. Now its flatness formed a gentle, open vista broken at intervals by flowering thickets and lone, spreading trees.

The lush greensward made a bright background for the armies that were swiftly deploying across it. Their neat ranks formed gaily coloured patterns on its surface, like painted playing-draughts dealt out upon a cloth of tufted green baize.

The masses of troops marching into position, extending their formations and threatening to flank and double one another, were the fighting hosts of mighty nations. The blue-caped legions of imperial Ophir—striding footmen, wheeling chariots, and cantering knights—comprised the southern half of the line. Their polished spear blades and pointed steel caps made flowing, shimmering constellations of sparks in the early light. Taking their places to the shrilling of reed pipes, they moved close beside their allies decked in earthier greys and browns.

These regiments rattled more heavily with armour, and moved in more rigid patterns to the thump and rustle of drums. Crowded beneath the sable banners of Nemedia, the darker armies occupied a place in the battle line matching their kingdom's position on the map, adjoining and to the north of Ophir. They raised serried rows of lances and halberds in a deadly-looking steel fence, pointing westward, with the sun warming their backs. At their centre, surrounded by a phalanx of armoured knights bearing aloft black-draped lances, could be seen the grey-haired, grey-bearded figure of fierce old King Balt.

Stocky in his worn, traditional jerkin of metal-studded leather, Balt bestrode a silver-grey charger, his polished helmet couched beneath one burly arm. At some time in his rise from service as a fighting officer in the Iron Legions of Imperial Nemedia, the grey metal of his helm and his armour's bosses had been reworked with purest gold. A mounted page beside him held aloft his huge shield, its battered old iron likewise leafed over with white and yellow gold. The two contrasting colours were inlaid skilfully in the shape of the royal Nemedian crest: a beaked, taloned gryphon. The shield's polished surface flashed forth a blazing beacon wherever it caught the sun.

King Balt's entourage moved southward through the knee-high grass, centring well behind the foremost ranks of Nemedian spearmen. They moved toward a second plumed, bannered enclave of nobility, hedged in by gleaming knights and flanked by wheeling chariots. This gathering was the elite household guard of young Lord Malvin, mighty Ophir's ablest general and self-declared despot.

Malvin had not yet deigned to crown himself king-uncertain, perhaps, whether kingship might not be a downward step from lordship. But he laid frank claim to the whole vast Ophirean nation; also to sundry neighbouring lands, including a portion of these very fields on which the allied armies were massing. In his territorial ambition Malvin enjoyed the zealous support, or grudging acquiescence, of all the various dukes, barons, marchesses, and other Ophirean nobles whose family insignia could be seen adorning the shields and pennons of his host.

Malvin lorded it astride a white stallion draped in silvery chain mail, its reins and harness adorned with fluttering blue streamers. The trim young ruler himself gleamed in a costly suit of steel plate; it was crafted well enough to allow him an unequalled range of movement, as his spirited waves and gestures to his massing troops showed. His armour was of pale, unadorned metal, free of any sculpture or embellishment—a costume well-suited to a commander whose force was becoming

known as the swiftest and most efficient in the world.

The young lord, in pressing his current territorial claim, had found common cause with his northern neighbour, Balt. Both rulers would enjoy carving off a slice of these western meadowlands and their richly carpeted thresholds for their powerful domains. Malvin, now adjusting his visor to shade his eyes, watched the elder monarch approach. As the two noble households drew together he spurred his horse forward through the mob of knights and retainers, greeting his ally with a shout and a brotherly handclasp.

Their meeting made a gala scene, the heraldry of the two great kingdoms converging and mingling like bright confetti. Lusty cheers sounded, weapons flourished in air, and the skirling of pipes and trumpets rose up festive beneath the blue dome of sky. The exuberance spread like a wave to the outer reaches of the horde, raising shouts from the ranks of Shemitish bowmen who marched in the pay of the allies, from mounted Zamoran mercenaries, and from motley crowds of spear-shaking peasants whose masses stretched off into the morning haze.

Bright was their array, glorious their purpose, and there remained but one obstacle to their mission. It lay in the red, black, and green tracings and massings of the army which opposed them.

The force stretched across the plain to westward, their backs to the Tybor River. The assembled host of proud Aquilonia consisted of battle-hard legions from the royal garrisons at Shamar and Tarantia, tall Gundermen mustered at double-time from the chill northern marches, and Bossonians in their forest-green doublets, summoned eastward from the Pictish frontier. Numbering a mere thousand or two horsemen backed by a dozen thousand men afoot, their weapons seemed to add but little to the forests of spears and halberds, the meadows of feathery arrow-fletchings, and the razored thickets of swords which had sprouted overnight on the Tybor plain.

The Aquilonian officers waited in their saddles, well forward in the ranks. Their mounts ranged about a single golden banner beneath which brooded their legendary commander, King Conan. Not Aquilonian he by birth; rather, a burly, dark-maned northern savage who made an imposing figure astride Sheol, his coal-black Zamboulan charger. Man and horse alike glistened darkly in the ebon gold-chased plate armour of the Black Dragons, his elite palace guard.

Conan was not one, sober men said, to let a sizeable chunk of Aquilonian soil be wrested from him by the revival of an ill-remembered territorial claim—not even in the face of treacherous collusion by two eastern neighbours. His army, though smaller than his foe men's, stood ready for fight. This was proven once and for all, as he chose that moment—the meeting of the two enemy kings—to raise high his broadsword and bellow forth the command, "Attack!"

The trumpets' angry blating echoed his words and heralded the first stroke of war: a flight of arrows from the front of the Aquilonian line. The projectiles rose steeply together, flashing in unison as they arched beneath the sun, and stooped hungrily toward the foremost ranks of Ophirean and Nemedian pikemen.

Some of the shafts may have fallen short, or glanced harmlessly from enemy shields; but the fabled, lethal accuracy of the Bossonian longbowmen was proven as ragged gaps opened miraculously in the foe men's ranks. Among the survivors could be seen a backward cringing and a faint, murmured confusion at this sudden rain of feathered death.

A second, less simultaneous volley of arrows flashed skyward, and a third. Then the first wave of Aquilonian knights charged, and the loosing abruptly ceased, lest the bowmen's clothyard shafts strike their armoured backs. These warriors—seasoned horsemen from the province of Poitain, bounding and plunging alongside rakish, richly mounted Tarantian nobles—galloped through narrow openings in the archers' line to bear down on the enemy. Heavy in their plate and mail, the horsemen gathered speed with a thunder of hoofbeats that tremored beneath the soles of every watcher.

Now came the chance for the Shemitish archers, from their places in the Nemedian and Ophirean

flanks, to strike at the charging Aquilonian cavalry. Their shorter, thicker bows and shafts were plied ably and swiftly, but could do little damage to the fast-moving armoured force. Here and there a mount stumbled, or a rider crumpled and fell; but most of the black-clad knights bore the razor-tipped rain without scathe. Shrugging off arrows like tiresome gnats, they hunched lower in their saddles and couched their red-pennoned lances to a deadly horizontal.

They smote the enemy line, the impact echoing down its length like the measured crash of a ocean wave striking a broad, stony beach. The gleaming fence of pikes, already broken and depopulated by arrow flights, cut and jabbed but a few riders out of their saddles. The charging knights, abandoning their lances in the crushed breasts of luckless defenders, quickly drew broadswords, maces and flails. With these they set about opening paths for the cheering Aquilonian footsoldiers, mostly red-jerkined Gundermen who came swarming and shouting up behind them.

Again it was the turn of the Shemitish mercenaries to loose their arrows. This time their shafts had more effect against the half-armoured footmen. But of a sudden, their crossfire was obstructed. The hindrance was their own allied Nemedian and Ophirean cavalry, who spurred forward in the hope of wreaking bloodier revenge.

It so happened that the eastern allies, pressed back against their own ranks by the onslaught of mounted knights and foot-bourne harriers, found their avenues of attack closed. Their bravest riders, desperate to join the fight, tried the only possible expedient: the frenzied cavalry pushed through gaps in either flank to assault the enemy. Their only strategy was to engage Aquilonian foot and horse soldiers by the shortest possible route, from either side.

But their rude plan failed to reckon with their enemies' most murderous weapon, the Bossonian longbow. The lank northern archers, screened now by a row of spearmen crouching low along the Aquilonian line, were provided with tall, bulky targets moving straight across their vision at near range. The cruel-hearted northmen, thanking ice-eyed northern gods for their good luck, found themselves free to loose, and draw, and loose again at will. Their long-practised skills were put to a leisurely test; in meeting it, their questing shafts sought out every crease in the Ophireans' armour, every slack, forgotten buckle, every Nemedian page-boy's ill-polished, rusty scale. Or else—if the angle was perfect, the shaft well-turned and its tip properly squared and waxed—the arrow would drive straight through a sheet of steel forged thick as a knife blade, with enough force left to pierce ribcage and a throbbing, straining heart.

The jesting bowmen called each mark loudly. They wagered together as they fought, gaining or losing a purse or a wench on the twang of a bowstring. Pairing their skills, they let fly in teams; more than one eastern knight, feeling a rap on his hauberk, glanced carelessly aside just in time to see a second well-aimed shaft rushing into his eye through his helmet's visor-slit. Some enemy riders galloped onward bristling arrows like bright-quilled hedgehogs, dead in the saddle; others lived, but found themselves unable to fight with a hand pinned to a chest, a thigh to a screaming horse, or a tongue to a shattered jawbone.

Of those heroic knights of Nemedias and Ophir who sallied forth from their embattled line, 'twas doubtful whether any would ultimately have survived the Bossonian barbs. But the next turn of battle freed them from their feathered torment. Fate left a few score of them alive—to face the charge of the elite Aquilonian cavalry reserve, led by the dreaded King Conan himself.

The sullen western monarch, watching for an opening, saw his chance in the rash charge of the enemy horsemen. Now his splendidly mounted Black Dragons thundered out through the line of archers and spearmen and drove straight across the tattered remnants of enemy cavalry. The last few of those died obediently before his knights' hurtling lances; onward then the king and his companions galloped, past the rearmost ranks of cheering, ax-waving Gundermen, to exploit the temporary gap the enemy charge had created in the Ophirean right flank. Their goal, clearly, was to drive straight to the

heart of the milling host and engage its commanders.

~~That meant facing, first, regiments of Shemitish bowmen. The lean, sun-browed mercenaries~~ clad in belted sheepskins and brass-bound leather caps, sped a dense flight of arrows at the approaching wave of cavalry. Yet their bows and shafts, cut from brittle, short-limbed oak rather than the pliant yew of the northern forests, lacked force of penetration. On seeing how little effect the first arrows had against Tarantian steel, the Shemites aimed the second flight less truly, even though the range was growing shorter. Their third volley was a mere aimless convulsion, loosed in desperation as the flying cavalry smashed into their ranks.

Men and weapons were ground beneath iron hooves; many an Aquilonian sword sheared away two or three mercenaries' lives in a single, furious swath. Against the steel-clad frenzy, the southerners' short, bronze blades were even more useless than their bows. And so the Shemites—those not slain in the first thundering heartbeats of close battle—turned to flee. Swiftly infecting the ranks behind them with their panic and confusion, they left only vacancy and chaos in the teeth of the Aquilonian onslaught.

It made a noble picture: the wide-drawn sketchings of red and black sending forth a dark gleaming crescent, a talon curving out to pierce deep into the blue formation. At its needle-like intrusion, the denser body of troops deformed as if in pain—not just the blue segment, but equally the grey-brown mass welded beside it against the grinding battlefront. Along the widening breach some masses of men, blue and brown alike, surged forward to fight; others recoiled more swiftly, their motion causing a swirling disruption of the once neat pattern.

Before long even the central pageant—the cluster of many-coloured flags surrounding the eastern commanders—seemed to falter. The bright-hued assemblage drifted aimlessly, jostled and eroded by the rushing currents of fugitives on all sides; then, as the flailing axes and maces of charging Aquilonian horsemen clove nearer, the elite formation began to melt and recede. There remained no longer a bright bubble for the darting steel pinprick to pierce; only gaudy, scattering shreds, the retinues of fleeing nobles and officers.

Their disintegration joined that of the broader formation and became a general, disorderly retreat. Whole sections of the pattern collapsed and flowed rearward, leaving other masses dangerously exposed. These were promptly encircled and obliterated by the lines of red and black which now, with the shriek of trumpets, surged forward all along the front.

The Stricken Field

At long last the grim priestess Night obscured the Tybor plain. Stealing across it like death's dark nursemaid, she shaded the staring eyes of the dead and trailed her discreet veil across grisly scenes left in battle's wake. From behind her in the east crept forth a swollen, prurient moon, whose prying eye sought to reveal all in lurid brightness. But its gaze had thus far been foiled by clouds; also by the smoke of burning farmsteads low down near the horizon, where its gloating visage cast a fitful yellow gleam.

From the east likewise came a bulky shambling figure, picking its way between the heaped-up remains of men and horses. It was a primal sight: a man, possibly—else a weary god or imp of battle—walking slumped and unsteady from fatigue and wounds. Yet he moved resolutely westward with a hint of unguessed strength held in reserve.

The shambler was mottled and blackened with gore, some of it drily crusted, some still oozing in a dark wetness. Girdled by the hacked, ragged remnants of a battle-suit with nearly every plate of armour cut or cast away, he bulked otherwise naked under a lank, clotted mane of hair. Helmet-less, he bore in one hand a longsword, fine and costly in its manufacture. The sword of a king it was, but notched now, and foul with the blood and excrement of battle. Its point he let drag carelessly behind him in the trampled, gory grass as he trudged doggedly onward, avoiding the more impassable drifts of corpses by the gloom of the half-shrouded moon.

Of a sudden he paused, watchful, at the sound of a human cry from one of corpse piles. It came again: a low, throaty moan, seeming to issue from somewhere in the deep shadow of a fallen horse, the dead beast already bloating in the spring warmth. He shambled near, gazing sombrely down to pierce the gloom. At length he distinguished the outline of a dark-caped footman, a soldier of Ophir by his garb.

The man was pinned face-down to earth by a broken cavalry lance. Its point had passed through his vitals into the ground, where it held firm, its long splinters still blossoming palely upward from his back. The man's peaked helm was now cast aside, his hair tousled, the grass within his reach uprooted or pounded flat by his day-long struggles. As he feebly raised his head from the soil to call out yet again, the moonlight showed off his blondish beard and moustache darkly crusted with the blood that had streamed down from his mouth and nostrils.

"God's mercy, please! In Mitra's name, a balm... aah-agk!" His throaty plaint was cut short as the warrior's sword hacked deep into his neck near the nape.

It was not a clean blow, yet it did its merciful work. When the body fell slack, the swordsmaster dragged his weapon free and turned wearily to shamble onward.

He had not gone far when he glimpsed another feeble motion amid the corpses. With steps growing heavy and reluctant, he turned aside once again to investigate. Here lay a giant Gunderman sorely wounded but alive. His face shone ashen; his eye and tooth gleamed yellowly in a stray shard of moonlight. He made no sound except steady, ragged gasps, and yet he struggled mightily, dragging himself onward through the grass. The wound to his belly was plainly mortal, and must have been agonizing. But the man's blood trail showed that he had crept a long distance, snail-like, greasing his way with his own entrails.

The longsword arched high and made a heavy clank, striking the rim of the wounded man's bronze helm as it chopped into his skull. Its notched edge caught in the bone, and proved devilish hard

to withdraw. Tugging at it, murmuring oaths of blood and fire, the lone warrior paused for breath. A ill fancy caused him to eye the windrows of slain around him, and he shuddered with guilt and superstitious dread. He wondered how many more of these, his fallen subjects and butchered foes might yet live, gasping unseen in darkness, buried alive under mountains of corpses—or whether every one of them might return to life this night, his loyal friends and enemies alike, to come groping after him with vengeful, claw-like hands....

Wrenching his great sword free, he lurched away, stepping over bodies strewn like jumble sticks, even tripping on some in his near panic. Then, as he staggered past the hulk of an overturned chariot, a sharp voice beseeched him:

“Nay, killer of the helpless, slay me not! Spare me in the name of Crom, Mannanan, Mitra, or whatever gory god this feast of souls is for!”

The gory shambler peered into the dimness, frozen in feral surprise. A moment later he made out the face and form of the speaker: a stocky, thick-featured man lying supine in the grass a mere half-stride ahead of him. The stranger could pose no threat; the nether part of his body was pinned to earth by an overturned chariot-crushed and crippled, undoubtedly, since the vehicle’s heavy bronze rim had gouged deep into the soil. Its centre pole was further weighted to earth by the carcasses of two mismatched roan geldings slumping dead in their traces.

Yet the voice had rung out bold and firm, and was answered in the same spirit by the swordsmaster.

“Why, then, should I spare you?—to make you captive? I am a warrior, not a slave-catcher. Holding his sword level, the speaker forced his breathing to a steadier cadence, lest he be thought afraid. “As an honest soldier, ’tis my part to slay the wounded cleanly, to accept what humble loot they may offer up in payment, and hope some honourable soul will do the same for me when it is my turn.” The warrior scowled down at the homely, upturned face. “Should I not extend the same kindness to you? ’Tis no more than my duty!”

“An honest soldier?” the fallen one demanded. “Nay, a liar!—because I know you for a king. The word rang out harshly over the field of slaughter, seeming to echo accusingly to a hundred dead ears in the moment of stillness that followed. “King Conan the Bloody-handed... Conan of the Dripping Ax, royal upstart of Aquilonia!” The speaker, though evidently wounded, showed amazing vitality, his face leering and grimacing froggily beneath the rim of an oversized antique helmet. “A king, you need trouble yourself no more with the petty codes of common soldiers! Has none yet told you that? To you, O King, all things are possible!”

The pause the hulking warrior allowed before answering was judicious. “So say you, stranger, and you seem to know the ways of kings.” He did not trouble to deny his identity; strangely, as a result of this grisly banter with a dying man, he found his soul being teased out of its morbid fears. “And yet I may kill you even so—to ease the pangs of your wound, or for better cause.”

“My wound? Nay, King Butcher, I have no wound! I fought too fiercely to be wounded, even by your back-shooting archers.” The speaker grew animated once again, rolling his eyes up at the king and thrashing both his arms, which looked oddly foreshortened in the moonlight. “I would be fighting still if this chariot had not pinned the skirt of my armour beneath its weight.” He gestured down where the brass rail cut across the metal leaves, crushing them uniformly flat at thigh level. “’Tis but a cheap, ill-fitting suit, furnished at my insistence on the eve of our march from Ianthe. Such was my frenzy for slaughter that even tight-fisted old King Balt could not deny me! Lord Malvin provided me the chariot—a shame that it lacked an able driver.”

“By Crom, I see... you are a dwarf!” Lowering his sword and easing its grimy point between the chest-plate and skirt-waist of the mashed armour suit, King Conan sawed at the leather strapping he found there, not meanwhile encountering any hips or belly within. At last the upper segment of the armour loosened and twisted free; two booted feet emerged, tentative and turtle-like, from the bottom

of the hauberk.

“There, you are unpinned.”

“Yes, at last!” Clambering to his feet, the dwarf stretched out his stocky frame to a height nearly equal to the midpoint of Conan’s thigh. “And here is my noble sword, Hearts-pang. It has lain just out of reach, and tantalized me since morn.” Stooping, he picked up a somewhat oversized dagger and held it above his head, twisting it to catch the glint of moonlight. He thrust his face up at Conan from beneath his skewed, ungainly helmet and cried out spiritedly, “Which way the fight?” “The fight is over, little man. Your side lost.” “What? I feared as much—a bitter shame!” He cocked his head aside, frowning and looking crestfallen. “And yet,” he added philosophically, “’tis possible to be over-hastid in proclaiming that a war is over, and who the victor is!” He shrugged his shoulders, making the helmet joggle loosely on his head. “But say, O King—if you do not have the pluck left to fight me, and settle matters once and for all—would it be too great a lapse of your royal dignity to help me remove this breastplate? It bangs against my shins when I walk.”

“Why, certainly, fellow—if you swear not to try any tricks!” Reaching down and catching the dwarf’s knife-fist in his own burly hand, Conan plucked the dagger from it, then knelt to pry its point in the vulnerable seams at the sides of the obsolete battle-dress. Before its razored steel, old leather parted, and the armour plates soon clanked free. “What is your name, little man?” “Ow! Careful, King Jabber, I am no lobster for you to gouge the meat out of!” Tugging away from Conan’s grasp, the dwarf shucked the breast and scapular plates off over his head to clatter on the ground. The helmet he retained, straightening it so that it rested more on his shoulders than his brow. “Delvyn is my name. I am, or was, imperial jester to King Balt’s court in Belverus—depending, I suppose, on whether the old gas-bladder still lives and spouts drivel.”

Beneath the armour the dwarf wore a jerkin and pantaloons, well-fitting yet scallop-fringed and clownishly adorned. Their sheen of silk in the moonlight seemed to confirm his boast of high office. “Balt?” the king’s voice rumbled ruefully. “Yes, he lives, in spite of my best efforts. As does his fellow traitor Malvin, as far as I know. I gave orders that none of my troops were to slay them, since I hoped to reserve that pleasure for myself.”

“Then the two of them must have cravenly fled the field! I would have guessed as much from Delvyn’s grotesque face, canted habitually upward and now facing the moon, creased in a sneer of scorn. “Balt is but a withered hangnail of the warrior he used to be, and Malvin was never anything but a fop. Ah, it pains me to serve such weaklings!” He shook his head in disappointment. “’Tis a rare king nowadays who craves to die at the forefront of his troops—who courts death as a maiden, and she becomes her husband! Though I have heard that you, Conan the Butcher, are one such.” Squaring his shoulders, he strutted up to Conan’s shadow and extended a stubby hand. “Return my noble sword, Hearts-pang, I beg you, O King!”

“Nay, little one, not so fast!” Conan slipped the knife into his crusty girdle and turned to grasp the hilt of his own sword, where it stood thrust into the earth. “I fear to return your cutlass to you so soon, and risk being stabbed in the knee. But come along with me, brave Delvyn, you are now my prisoner!” Choosing a path between corpse drifts, he resumed walking, using his own moon shadow as a pointer. “Mayhap I will barter you back to your kingdom for thrice your weight in gold.”

“’Twould be a poor bargain at that rate. I venture to say I am worth thrice your own unwieldy weight and more, O King!” Delvyn shrugged and scuttled along, catching up to his captor with an air of resignation. “Not that the crotchety, bilious old Balt would ever admit my worth or pay it! More likely he would say I bedevilled him, and blame me for his miserable defeat. Just because I counselled him to settle his territorial claims in the only honourable way!”

“King Balt is old and addled indeed, if he heeds the advice of his professional fool.” Conan led the way around an oak tree, its lower branches broken and pruned by flailing weapons, the west side

its trunk furred by a blizzard of arrows. "But ho," he grunted, "here come riders! If they are my enemies, you may yet win your freedom." He raised his sword and moved to place his back against the tree. A moment later he lowered the weapon as it became clear that the three horsemen's mail was black not only with night and soil, but with the glossy lacquer of the Black Dragon guard.

"Glory be unto Mitra!" a familiar voice hailed. "It is the king—he lives!" The armoured man wheeling his galloping destrier to a halt, swung elegantly down from the saddle. Gracefully and silently he caught the weight of his steel suit on the ground, then sank smoothly to one knee before Conan's feet. There, devoutly, he bowed his head and raised one mailed hand to be clasped in his ruler's. The other two horsemen, meanwhile, reined up and dismounted less expertly, clanking forward to assume identical postures just behind and to either side of the first rider.

"Come, Trocero! By Crom's bunions, you know I hate such obeisances!" Reaching down and clasping the armoured man's shoulder, he hauled him up to his feet.

"Aye, Your Majesty!" Count Trocero reached up to loosen his helmet, lifted it off his head, and lowered it into the crook of his arm with a heavy clank. The face thus exposed was broad and handsome, its nose and cheekbones arching firm above a black moustache shot with grey, its hawk-like dark eyes taking in Conan's figure intently. "Are you well? Sire, you cannot imagine the agony of doubt we have been through!—searching the whole vast wake of the routed armies, not knowing whether you might be slain or captured, whether Aquilonia still had a king, or whether half the empire would be demanded as your ransom.... Forgive me, Sire, but 'tis well you are here!" Bowing again swiftly, the nobleman seized Conan's hand and pressed his moustached lips against his king's blood-grimed knuckles.

"Faugh, enough now! Trocero, I warn you!" With his free hand Conan dealt his friend an ill-tempered buffet to his armoured shoulder, making the solemn knight stagger as he stood upright.

"Aha, a king well-beloved by his army," Delvyn observed from behind Conan. "Such a one can go far."

"Nonsense!" Conan muttered over his shoulder. "And blast your impudence, dwarf, I already have gone far!"

"But Trocero speaks true, O King," affirmed one of the other two knights, rising stiffly to his feet. "We missed you sorely." He paid no more heed to the watching dwarf than he would have to a child. "Our fears were greatest after we found Lord Elgin, cut down with three of your bodyguards and a league and more from here. All were dead, and so there was none left to tell us whither you had gone."

"Alas, Elgin too!" Conan answered glumly. "The staunch fellows were struck down escorting me through an ambush laid by Ophirean knights. That was our closest approach to the fugitive kings, and still the scoundrels would not turn and fight! By Baalok's bloody furnace!" His foreign oath was accompanied by a toss of his head and a fierce grimace. "Brave Sheol carried me through, only to be slain a half-mile further on by skulking spearmen. Bless his noble fetlocks, there never was such a horse!" The monarch shook his head in genuine regret. "By then I was the last rider still in pursuit with any surviving horseflesh too well prized by our fleeing enemies to be found! So I had to wait back, killing a slinking invader when I could. I saw some good men fallen, and other grievously wounded...." His voice rasped away to silence.

"What of your armour, Sire?" Trocero asked attentively. "And your crown?"

"Bah! Cavalry armour only hampers a man afoot! 'Twas but a drag on my sword-arm. As for the crown"—the king scowled tempestuously—"why, 'tis nothing but a damned nuisance! At first glimpse of a crown, a man's enemies scamper fecklessly away—or else they'll try to maim and capture you, rather than killing you fairly! It makes it too hard to chase down an honest fight." Conan shook his shaggy mane, disgruntled. "I cast the thing off into a pile of bodies, somewhere near Sheol's noble carcass."

“Your Majesty, if I may suggest...” Trocero’s tone was respectful, his expression grave. “Before we rejoin the other officers, Sire, I want to say to you as a friend... might it not be more prudent for Conan, if you did not press so hard in an attack as to endanger yourself, and outrun your army? We have fought together for many years, and I know your ways. But now things have changed, and it might be wiser to preserve yourself—” “What, Trocero? You mean hang back from a fight, like those cowardly hens Malvin and Balt? I’ll pretend I didn’t hear you say it!” As Conan flared at the remark, his bearing grew stiffer and more energetic than it had seemed at any time since the battle. “What man, are you trying to tell me? That I’m too old, too frail, to fight alongside my troops? I am still a capable warrior, remember, Trocero—until some better man takes it into his head to disprove it!”

“Nay, nay, Sire, I did not mean any offence!” The count shook his head, holding his ground broad-shouldered and firm before his commander. “Conan, I did not mean you were unable! Rather, you are too important—too well-loved, and too vital to the Aquilonian nation to risk throwing your life away in battle! If you would but be content to direct our campaigns and give your officers the full, measured benefit of your judgement, without galloping forth to win every fight yourself—” “No, Trocero, you ask too much.” Conan’s scowl was less tempestuous. “After languishing so long in the boredom of the court, busying myself with a pallid round of domestic trifles, I require action, risk! It makes me feel young.” Still scowling, he shook his crusted mane. “Battered and weary as I am, I have not in months felt as alive as I do now! Just because a man’s brow glints with grey—or with gem-crusted gold, for that matter—it doesn’t mean his manhood is past. I am more than a king, I tell you—I am still a warrior! When that ends, so does my reign.”

“Yes, Sire. My apologies. I should have known you would see it as a point of honour.” The count bowed deeply and turned to grasp the reins of his waiting mount. “Take my horse, Sire, so that you can hasten back to ease the minds of your staff.”

“Nay, Trocero, I want you to ride along with me.” The king’s nod to his friend was grudgingly accepting. “Let me take Stavro’s mount, here—if he does not mind the walk.” The knight he had named dropped graciously again to one knee and proffered Conan the reins of his steed. “Though I am heavier than you, Sir Knight, I lack armour, so your beast will not be sorely overburdened.” Conan swung himself stiffly up into the saddle.

“And what of me, O King?” Delvyn called from far below, waving his arms to get attention. “My legs will hardly keep pace with a hulking, lumbering knight, much less a troop of horses. And you leave me here disarmed! Am I to find my own way back to Belverus?” “Nay, fool, of course not!” Conan rumbled, his smudged features cracking to a white-toothed laugh at the pathetic sight of the dwarf. “You are my sole plunder from this day’s noble affray! Come, ride along with us. Trocero, you would not mind carrying him on your saddle hump, as you would a sack of turnips? Aye, Sir Stavro, that’s the way! Fling him aboard and we’re off!”

The figures moving about the campfire looked glum and weary. Pale glints of moon and firelight on armour plate, surmounted by pale, downcast faces—all was strangely subdued for the camp of a victorious army. At the sound of hoof beats, faces looked up and brightened, first with firelight, then with elation as the sentry’s hail rang forth.

“It is Count Trocero... and the king!”

“Praise Mitra and Crom,” voices buzzed around the campfire, “the king returns!”

“Huzzah! Conan lives, and so our victory is complete!” The first to come dashing around the fire was a tall, slender man in jerkin and pantaloons, his armour removed except for his breastplate. He ran up as the king reined in; but, catching the gleam of firelight on wet blood at the dismounting warrior’s rib cage, he halted without laying hands on his ruler. “Sire, you are wounded!”

“Nonsense, loyal Prospero, ’tis but a welt!” Turning from his steed, Conan seized his retainer by both arms and dealt him a friendly clout on the back. “So we have our victory, costly as it is, and our

lives—the luckiest of us, anyway!” He addressed the broader, exultant group of faces. “Once again generous invaders have shed their blood to sweeten Aquilonia’s rich soil!”

As Conan turned with Prospero from the onlookers’ cheers, he heard the nobleman ask, “And what have you there, Trocero, a child? Or is it a Tybor River troll?” His gaze rested on the small figure being helped down by the count from the warhorse’s high saddle.

“Rarer than that,” Conan told him. “’Tis a dwarfish clown of King Balt’s court. I caught him on the battlefield, helpless as a mouse with its tail in a snare. If we keep him by, he may afford us some amusement.” “I may as well,” Delvyn said, swaggering into the crowd of armoured knights as an equal. “My former master will have little use for me in the days to come—resting and rejuvenating—he probably will be among the randy trollops of Lord Malvin’s harem, in the palace at Ianthe.” The dwarf looked up at them innocently. “’Twas there they planned to retire, I heard them say, in the unlikely event of a military defeat by a ham-fisted western king.”

His joke brought no laughter from his listeners, rather, gruff murmurs. “Silence, rascal!” one knight barked.

Another muttered, “Sounds like an ill desert for a pair of treacherous scoundrels!”

It was Trocero who spoke next, bringing up a matter of business. “King Conan, we should recover your crown, methinks. There have been few looters so far, because our army’s swiftness outran the camp followers—”

“Aye, and our enemies’ shameless rout stampeded theirs.” Conan nodded good-naturedly. “But we can easily send troopers after the bauble. Tell them we’ll pay the finder a gold talent; that will simplify matters. But no murdering one another for it, or the prize is void!”

The order was passed, causing an immediate, audible stir in the encampment spreading beyond the fire.

Then it was Prospero’s turn to raise a practical matter. “By the grace of the gods, and by your generalship, Conan, we were able to defeat both enemy forces. They are weakened, I would guess beyond any hope of prosecuting their war plans.” The Poitanian smiled in the firelight, waving one be-ri-inged hand in a gesture of dismissal. “But as you know, my liege, we still have foot-borne companies marching here from the northern and western frontiers, and fresh levies and supply columns coming from my home province. I can send word to have them halted—”

“Nay, Prospero, do not turn the reinforcements back yet.” Conan’s face was pensive as he gazed into the flames. “The country behind us is secure, and our border forts will hold now. But Aquilonia has suffered insult from these eastern kings. I will think on how best to conclude this matter, and secure our land against further trespass.”

With the comfort of sour wine, watery forager’s stew, and undersized camp chairs, their council lasted late into the night. Meanwhile, spoiling troopers roved the Tybor plain, seeking treasure amid the hacked carcasses. They had no need of torches, for the moon glared down brightly over the field of their ghastly victory.

Homecoming

The royal palace at Tarantia swarmed with torch-lit shadows. The vaultings of its banquet hall boomed like a basswood drum, echoing fierce jungle rhythms. At the centre of the great room, before King Conan's broad, onyx table, cavorted lithe black dancers of Kush. Lissome females, lovely in their tall headdresses and tight waist-wraps, sat on folded knees with their shapely posteriors toward the feast tables; they watched as intently as did the royal guests, while the men of their troupe danced a mad gavotte of spears and billowing torches.

The black southerners leaped and tumbled like demons, hurling themselves over and beneath scything spear blades and scorching plumes of yellow flame. They brandished high their blazing spears, twirled and exchanged them, and at last crossed their long, wicked points in a razored steel grid work. Atop this perch the most agile of the dancers leaped to balance himself—barefoot, arms aloft, his dark skin shining with the sweat of exertion and daring. When at last the pounding crescendo of wooden drums ceased, the room's breathless silence filled with shouts and cheers from the audience. They stood applauding at their tables, raising foamy goblets high in sloshing salute.

The lead dancer, to renewed applause, somersaulted nimbly down from his spear trellis. As the lamps were unveiled, King Conan himself arose from his demi-throne at the royal table. "A brave performance, men of Kush!—better than any I recall seeing, even in the days when I myself ruled king over a part of your distant homeland. But one trick I remember which I did not see tonight."

Laying a hand on the red chalcedony inlay of the ornate table before him, he vaulted lightly over it. His soft-booted feet easily cleared the goblets and wine ewers to land smoothly on the marble pavement at the farther side. Adjusting the gold circlet of his imperial crown on his scar-seamed forehead, he strode forward, making an imposing, broad-shouldered figure among the lean dancers.

"Have you forgotten this?" He reached out, seized a pair of the long-bladed assegais from two of the tolerant Kushites, and began twirling them in his big hands, stepping nimbly backward to place any bystanders outside the flaring, slicing arcs. In a moment the blazing wick-ends of the spears fanned by their swift motion through air, traced bright, interlinking circles of flame in the dim-lit hall. At this, watchers and dancers alike laughed and applauded.

"And furthermore, lest you think the risks these warriors take are mere mummery"—the king deftly halted the spears' flaring orbits and grasped their thick shafts one in either fist, spear blades downward. Then, bunching his mighty shoulders, arching his entire body and taking a great, plunging stride forward, he flung both assegais simultaneously—straight, it seemed, into the faces of the shocked onlookers. The spears raced flat across the hall, to embed themselves with a chunking double impact in the leather-finished back of the ornate chair the king had recently vacated. One flaming oscillating spear butt knocked over a goblet on the banquet table; the other torch-end sagged lower, its flame sizzling in dregs of spilled wine.

The guests applauded dutifully, amid murmurs of astonishment and relief. There was laughter too, at the expense of the uneasy courtiers who had been sitting nearest the place targeted by their king—especially white-bearded Chancellor Publius, who had tumbled from his chair to the floor in panic. He arose now with a rueful grimace and dusted himself off, aided by a pair of similarly discomfited servants who had dropped their trays in fright.

One seatmate of Conan's appeared scarcely to have noticed—Zenobia, the stately queen sitting in her ivory chair immediately to the left of the throne. She only gave a toss of her long, lustrous black

hair and adjusted her posture slightly. Another face that seemed wholly unruffled was that of the dwarf Delvyn, perched just beyond Publius on the king's right hand—and yet a rather different demeanour on his part had been observed when the spears flew. Not only had he ducked beneath the rim of the table—which, in spite of the thick cushions placed in his seat, came up to his chin—but he had dropped from his chair and scuttled beneath its legs for protection, to the merriment of the company.

“Well enough, then, Aquilonians,” the king decreed as he waved away the dancers and strode back to his place, “we can continue feasting for the nonce.” Vaulting the table once again, he lent assistance to the servants who were trying to unstick the heavy spears from the seatback. At length the still-smoking weapons were carried out; the king, resuming his seat, exerted himself to catch up with any banquet courses he may have missed.

“What think you, Zenobia?” he asked of his queen, between bites from a joint of beef which he plied aloft in one greasy fist. “Is this not a jolly triumph and homecoming feast? Too many months have passed, me-thinks, since our gloomy palace saw its like.”

“Yes, Conan, 'tis a splendid affair—though not as gala as it might have been with more preparation. And not a real homecoming, since so many of our lords and officers remain posted with their troops at the eastern border. But your dancers from Kush were an inspired choice—truly a barbaric spectacle.”

“Indeed.” The king nodded innocently, reaching for his wine flagon. “And my double spear-charge was almost a success—not quite perfect, by Crom's thorny cudgel! But it pleases me to see that you, my love, did not fear that your king meant to make a flaming kebab out of you—unlike some others I could name.”

The last was spoken with a reproachful look at Chancellor Publius, whose thin, silk-clad shoulders stirred in protest. “Your Majesty, I apologize for my lack of faith.” A pout ruffled the chancellor's neatly trimmed white beard. “But I remind you, such weapon-play is hardly a custom of the stately court of Aquilonia, and so I was unprepared. I did not fear your intent, Sire, only that you might miss your target—”

“You mean,” Conan said irritably, “to suggest that my arms have grown weak and unsteady with age.” He barked out a curt laugh. “You think the years have made me as feeble and unsure, perhaps, as your own frail self?” Though the king's questions were made patently in jest, it was clear that he bristled underneath, due perhaps to cloying wine or other distemper. “In that you err, old man—”

“Now, now, Conan, do not rave on so!” Queen Zenobia leaned to her husband's side and placed soothing, restraining hands on his shoulders. “Publius meant no offence, my darling! He knows as well as I do how much you enjoy your strongman tricks, and how of late you feel you must prove to all that your strength is supreme and unfailing.”

Under her gentle touch, the monarch eased back against the pierced leather of his chair. He smiled at last and waved his beef haunch forgivingly at his companions. Meanwhile, from beyond Publius, a throaty voice piped up.

“As for my own sudden departure during your athletic display, Noble King”—the dwarf Delvyn arose to his feet upon the seat of his capacious chair—“though some might brand it cowardice, I charge for which I would most assuredly trounce them flat—I assure you, fine sir, 'twas only to fetch my lute from beneath the chair, that I might pluck you a song of tribute.”

“A song, then!” Conan proclaimed, sitting up to hail the company. “How fitting for this victorious feast! Attend his words and chords, merrymakers, for the little man is a skilled and famous fool!”

At this introduction and the ensuing laughter, Delvyn produced from beside him an oval-bellied instrument. He struck the strings, and sounded a chord that bore an eerie tone to it, like the mournful airs of the western coast. He called out the name of his song in a loud, squeaky voice, strummed a le-

plaintive chord, and then launched in with a comically bouncy rhythm.

The Ox-Bone Sceptre

*A reaver there came from the blustering north
Who throttled a monarch to fatten his worth.
Now he rules Aquilonia, a royal brigand
More suited to Kush than a civilized land.*

*Brave Conan the Clouter he's called through the realm
For the play of his sceptre 'gainst enemy helm.
He clouts them with bronze and he clouts them with steel.
Better, give him an ox-bone, his full strength to feel.*

*His reign shall prevail in a wide, gruesome swath
So remember to duck when the king waxes wroth.
If you're wishing his statecraft and skill to reveal,
Why, give him an ox-bone, nor mutton nor veal.*

As the verses ended and the last chord was strummed, there came a moment of breathless doubt as to how the listeners would respond. Then a guffaw of mirth from the king himself decided them all, precipitating an avalanche of titters, hoots, and table thumps. It was clear that Conan had decided not to take offence, at least not for the moment. The scurrilous ditty had not, after all, pushed beyond propriety, and so the tension was released. The applause was too scattered to drown out critical comments, such as:

“A truly execrable rhyme, that!”

“Yes, but not bad for the prong of the moment. And it took gall!”

Publius's judgement was delivered over the undersized minstrel's head to his seatmates at large. “Hardly in keeping with the dignity of the crown, I would say. And scarcely a fit tribute to our recent victory on the field of battle! I would have expected a more inspirational sort of ballad or anthem celebrating our triumph.” “But is the victory yet certain?” put in Count Trocero, leaning toward Conan and his chancellor from his chair beyond Delvyn's. “We have received no pledge of armistice from the offending kings, nor any offer of terms.” “Terms!” Conan snorted from his half-throne, making Publius flinch. “I know what terms I'd offer them: the term of a pike through their rotty gizzards—” “Now, Your Majesty,” the chancellor chided dutifully, “in diplomacy, 'tis not always wise to press quarrels to the death. 'Tis better to allow your adversary some means of escape, the better to profit yourself by reducing his will to fight.” The elder counsellor shook his long, lustrous grey locks. “Our recent enemy Lord Malvin, for instance, was probably driven to attack Aquilonia by the increasing pressure he felt on his kingdom from the east.”

“The east?” Conan queried. “You mean from Koth?”

“Yes, truly, my king.” Publius nodded patiently. “If you wouldst but recall, we spoke of it but a fortnight ago, before the hue and cry of the invasion. Young Prince Armiro, Koth's new satrap out of Khoraja, has for some time now been whittling away at Malvin's eastern lands in a deft series of campaigns.”

“Aye, 'tis so,” slim-moustached Prospero put in, craning into the conversation across Queen Zenobia's shapely bosom. “Young Armiro is a deft intriguer, and a military commander of considerable grasp. Not content to rule Khoraja, he jockeyed himself into control of the entire Kothian

Empire. Now he strains even at those vast borders to badger Ophir. A real firebrand, he!”

“I know of Armiro.” Conan nodded thoughtfully. “But I assumed, Publius, that your talk of border skirmishes between Ophir and Koth was exaggerated.” The regent frowned in perplexity. “For can it make any sense that Lord Malvin, embattled on his eastern border, would open up a second battlefront to the west with an enemy as powerful as ourselves?”

“That,” a sharp voice proclaimed, “was my former master’s doing.” Delvyn’s words, rising up like a five-pitched in their midst, came as an evident surprise to most of the speakers. “King Balt, Regent of High Nemedra and the Subject Domains, said he desired a further partition of western territories as a buffer to guard the vulnerable lowlands of the Tybor Gap.” The dwarf gazed placidly around at the raised eyebrows his intelligences raised.

“As you know,” he went on authoritatively, “Nemedra is protected by mountain ranges to the west and south, but not toward the Tybor Valley. ‘Rectifying his borders,’ the old scoundrel called it. Balt made it a condition of his alliance, in undertaking to aid Ophir against Koth, that Lord Malvin would help him first in an incursion against your kingdom. Ophir was to share in the spoils, of course, but crusty old Balt was the instigator.”

“Aha, so that’s how it stood!” Conan’s fist smote the table a blow that rippled the wine, even to the heavy crystal vessels on the massive tabletop. “Curse that vile curmudgeon Balt and the spineless dandy Malvin! ’Tis well that we bloodied their prying noses!”

“The Kothian Armiro thinks so, Sire,” Publius answered levelly. “His armies are even now engaged in hounding the Ophirean stag that was crippled by our Bossonian archers.”

“Already? You know this?” Conan turned a gimlet gaze on his chancellor. “I know, Publius, you receive news here in the capital sooner than our spies on the eastern border!”

The chancellor shrugged. “’Tis nothing, Your Majesty. The Corinthian legate receives his dispatches via carrier pigeon; his messengers occasionally find their way into my stew-pot instead. The brief we intercepted this morning states that Kothian troops are on the march in southern Ophir, extending a flank toward the capital at Ianthe. The Nemedian king’s force remains in the southern realm, but the allied kings do not seem very active in the field.”

“Stalled at Ianthe, most likely.” Delvyn’s laugh was shrilly vindictive. “Unsure whether to flee east or west, or sit and wait for a siege! That would be just like the two of them, simpering Malvin and my fuddled old master.”

“By Crom,” Conan exclaimed, “slow down, all of you! Am I to understand that even as we stand here, Ophir, the kingdom we bested in the field, is being gobbled up from its farther side? —and largely as a result of our victory, but by another invader? —and this a greedy, energetic princeling who bodes to become an even worse neighbour than the present king of Ophir?”

Faced with slow, reticent nods from his counsellors, Conan frowned and shook his regally mane head. “If true, ’tis a sobering thought... more sobering, I fear, than Queen Zenobia and I would wish to entertain on this night of gaiety and mirth. Therefore I shall wait until tomorrow midday before considering a plan. Wine bearers!”

The king snapped his fingers to hurry the servants, and so the feasting proceeded. As the flow of banquet courses from the kitchen gradually trickled to an end, a new troupe of dancers and musicians was summoned forth. These were more familiar to the courtiers, being all female, recruited by the king as public entertainers from what, before the advent of Queen Zenobia, had been his harem. Their skills were well-practiced, their dances and adornments painstakingly selected for freshness and originality.

In the course of the entertainment, however, their costumes tended to dwindle and fall away, while the repertoire inevitably narrowed to certain favourite, earthy steps. Before long, to the thumping of timbrels and tweeting of pipes, they performed independently about the hall, some

dancing on tables, others almost in the laps of their enthusiastic admirers.

The king himself sat hemmed into his demi-throne by two of the most energetic dancers. They pranced and whirled, trailing shawls across his face and through his playfully grasping fingers. They flounced their skirts and ruffled their loose bodices before him, the better to commend the marvels of their supple, undulating bodies to the royal sight. The king watched dry-lipped, patting or clutching elusive, flying forms where he might, otherwise lounging in his chair and praising their skills aloud to the company.

“Splendid, Mora, wherever did you learn that trick? You are keeping yourself in fine feather, girl. But Lilith, do not overwork yourself so—come here, wench, and rest on my lap! It has been long since we had an intimate talk.”

But the pale-haired temptresses, with a glance aside to the patiently watching queen, continued spinning and writhing just beyond their monarch’s reach. Not long afterward, at the discreet wave of a red-nailed hand, both dancers flitted off to tantalize other lingerers at the emptying tables. It was Zenobia who at last hoisted the wine-bleary king up from his gilded chair—as it was her silk-gowned body his greedy fingers finally closed on, and her kisses and coaxings that drew him away across the banquet hall, toward the winding stairway to the bed chambers above.

As the intensity of the dances heightened, many of the revellers had departed—in pairs, mostly for the sake of greater propriety or greater ardour. Conan’s high counsellors had gone their way some time before. That left the feast tables in the possession of a few hardy guests, bachelors or lone travellers, whom the entertainers lingered late to tease and console. One of the dancers, the shortest and plumpest of them all, rested near Delvyn where he sat dwarfed in his chair. But when she made cautious overtures of friendship, he hopped down from his seat with a look of loathing, shaking his lute at her as if it were a weapon. He retreated to the shadows of the chimney corner, whence his green eyes could be seen glinting throughout the remainder of the night.

“The folk of the court are saying that we are an unlikely pair, little man.”

Conan sat at his writing-table in the east tower, listening to Delvyn strum his lute. A casement window, standing open on a vista of blue sky and leaf-shimmering treetops, threw morning sunlight onto the scrolls and parchments arrayed before the king. As he worked, writing and signing proclamations and military orders with a black-dipped ostrich plume and sealing them with drops of red beeswax from a candle-heated urn, chords of eerie melody drifted from the shadows where his companion sat.

“Tongues will wag,” the dwarf replied, “the envious ones most loosely. As is fitting, perhaps since our meeting was such a lucky chance.” With a melancholy flourish of strings, the minstrel launched into the refrain of a languid western air. “If not for a clumsy charioteer,” he complained, “a ill-fitting suit of armour, and a barbar-king’s mad whim to rove the field of carnage alone, why, I would now be dead. Or in Ianthe, or Belverus, playing to a more jaded audience of besotted nobles and their fancy tarts.”

“Hmm. And yet, my friend,” Conan equably remarked, “I smell the taint of destiny in our meeting. We have much in common, you and I. For one thing, I betimes have had my own problems finding armour that fits.” Delvyn, instead of laughing, struck an ill-tuned chord on his lute. “Charioteer that up to Malvin’s miserliness as a host,” he said, resuming his melody, “and to my master Baltar’s loutish inattention in not getting me properly outfitted before we left Nemedra. What kind of negligent ruler is it, I ask you,” the dwarf complained in evident sincerity, “who leaves his fiercest warrior ill-armed, unmounted, and ungirded on the eve of battle?” “You would have fought valiantly for your king, I’m sure,” Conan said.

“And did so!” Delvyn put in sharply.

“Yes, yes, of course. And yet your speeches give him little honour, nor any to his ally, Lord

Malvin.” The king looked up at last from his stack of royal decrees.

“If you speak so ill of them in their absence, I wonder, how will you speak of me when my back is turned?” Delvyn strummed the plaintive air’s refrain. “Need you wonder, O King Gut-squeezer”—the pale, close-set eyes glinted at Conan out of the shadows—“keeping in mind that I speak only ill of you to your face?” Conan guffawed. Once his burst of laughter had subsided, he swigged from his cup and said, “Good, then, brave Delvyn! A king learns to cherish frankness above all else—especially from fools, who always flock so thickly around him. I can accept your acid tongue, as long as you warrant that I need not fear spying by you, nor outright treachery.” His speech ended with a direct, sombre look to Delvyn in his seat atop a heavy brass-bound chest.

“No spying, O King. And no treachery, outright or otherwise.” Delvyn’s strumming shifted subtly in key, although his gaze did not drop. “I have no need of such devious tricks, I assure you. And I pledge no further loyalty or fealty to King Balt and his jackal Malvin.” Without interrupting his melody’s soulful conclusion, the little man rearranged his stubby legs beneath him. “To be frank with you, Sire, I have seen more than enough of their half-handed misrule. And I know friends in Iantla and in the Nemedian officer corps who feel the same way.”

“Indeed, little man. You know much about the ways of kings, ’tis clear.” After gazing thoughtfully another moment at the dwarf, Conan turned back to his desk-work. “And with your vast trove of experience, what think you of this, my kingdom?”

“Aquilonia? Yours is a passable realm, Conan the Neck-cruncher.” Now Delvyn plied his lute tunelessly, wandering into an eerie thicket of notes lost or abandoned between melodies. “’Tis a wealthy land, to be sure. Worldly and many-striped to my eye, and yet docile enough to let itself be yoked and tamed by a belching, brawling savage from its barren northern hinterlands. A strange combination, that: the nation which gives rise to perhaps the highest flower of Hyborian art and culture, cowering under the knotted fist of an unschooled, unlettered foreigner! A clear case of the dominance of brute, barbarian force over decadent, civilized maunderings—”

“I respect the arts, little man,” Conan interrupted him, “your own plinkings and plunkings included. Since becoming king, know you, I have learned to write and have even set my hand to bardic verse.”

“A great achievement for you, doubtless. Many monarchs and generals turn to such pastimes in retirement, after they have reached the compass of their powers and ambitions.” The dwarf strummed idly on, his chords making a shifting background to his words. “Once a man forsakes the work for which he is best suited, he may find it equally challenging to perform less well in a less notable pursuit. Such tasks can lighten the burden of indolence and sated hopes.”

“Rapsallion, you call me indolent?” Conan was provoked once again to look up from his work. “Why, man, I am galloping just as hard as I can, and barely keeping apace, what with sorceries and uprisings here at home, and rapacious kings at my border!” He shook his black mane. “Long ago I learned that a throne is a slumbering tiger, easier to mount than to ride!” He shook his head angrily, his dark locks framing a darker scowl. “And sated—well I deserve to be sated, after spending my life scrabbling and searching for treasure and ease. Now, by dint of the harshest and most gruelling effort of my days, I command power and treasure enough to satisfy any man!”

“Interesting, King Purse-grabber. To each his own.” Delvyn shrugged. “And yet, from the viewpoint of the greater world, your kingdom is by no means unique. It is no richer than mighty Turan, for instance, and no vaster than far-flung Khitai—or so at least the travelling adepts tell me. How much greater, I wonder, are the needs and cravings of the rulers of those lands, that they should have attained more than you in all your barbaric rapacity?” He struck an idle chord on his lute. “And tell me, O King, all this power and treasure you possess—does it indeed satisfy you?”

Conan set his pen into his ink pot with an air of barely restrained exasperation. “Crom’s curse o

you, little man! What is it you are prying and probing at?"

From his shadowy perch, the dwarf shrugged. "Merely to sound you out, King Gold-filcher; learn whether you are a truly exceptional king, or just an ordinary one." His small hand scattered handful of notes from his lute strings. "For you know, although the world abounds with bold general clever court intriguers, and brilliant priests and magicians, kings are not an especially able lot, kings go. They inherit or usurp their power, and keep it or lose it as the case may be, generally without doing anything remarkable after they become king. By then their greatest exploits are usually far behind them. Often their kingship is but a retreat from life—a dotage, as with sour old Balt, or a morass of vanity and fleshy abandon, as with Malvin. They are surrounded by comforts which imprison a man, and by loyal, solicitous friends, counsellors, and family who do what no enemy hardship could ever have done: that is, they tame and disarm the ravening self-seeker who makes himself king." Delvyn shook his head musingly. "'Tis true, perhaps, that most men crave ease and security. But to surrender to them—that, O King, is a death worse than death."

All through Delvyn's speech, Conan sat with his brow knit, listening to the blending of words and toneless, haunting lute notes, remaining idle and pensive.

"Now in you, King Sword-slinger, I thought I perceived one whose spirit could not be so easily tamed. Are you not after all, besides being such a vast brute of a fellow, a sly and ruthless fighter, free of all the moral qualms and crotchets the weak call 'civilized'?" During Delvyn's brief pause, Conan could feel the dwarf peering at him inscrutably from the shadows.

"And, from what I have been told of your escapades and luck, one would suspect a further influence at work, some hint of an unseen power. Since you are no spell-caster, and your rustic aversion to magic of all kinds is well known, it implies something even more mysterious, be it witting to you or not—the touch of the gods, no less. A strange thought, that; and yet it seems impossible otherwise to explain the swift, astonishing rise of one so ill-suited to grandeur and high estate.

"If indeed you enjoy the gods' favour—that elusive gift so many kings lay claim to, based on far less convincing evidence—why, then it raises the inevitable question: to what end? Were you raised from barbarous obscurity to idle here amid callow, womanly comforts, to fret over vulgar daily concerns and cling to what wealth and sway you have? Truly, O King, were you fated to come only so far, and then cease? Or does it lie in your destiny to achieve something more—something, perhaps which no monarch on earth has yet achieved?

"For it is a small world, O King—the stretch of it we know, at least. 'Tis little more than a hamlet, really, a sleepy village of tired, passable kings. There never yet lived the man who mastered more than a small part of it—a measured, circumscribed tract, no greater than a hand's-breadth on the sheepskin maps you kings are so fond of drawing and redrawing in bright ink and brighter blood. Delvyn ceased his strumming and gestured with his lute to one such map, which was pinned to the wall beside the casement.

"Get on with it, dwarf! Where are you leading me?" Conan's voice sounded level in the silence, toneless and resigned.

"I am telling Your Majesty that, since 'tis but one paltry world, why should it have more than one ruler? And who better to rule it, King Skull-basher, than you? Is that not your obvious, unalterable destiny, for which the gods have been saving you so diligently from your own bloodthirsty folly?"

The interval before Conan answered was a silent, lengthy one. He sat motionless before his writing-table, half-turned toward Delvyn sitting against the tower room's rounded wall; even in his grey cloth jerkin, dagger-belted kilt, and plain leather sandals he was every inch a king. At last he spoke once again with the same air of weary resignation.

"And what part of the world does that leave for you, little man? What is to be your share of my divine destiny?"

Delvyn riffled the lute strings once more. “Is it not plain to you, Sire? I am but a jester. The only way for a jester to be great is to be the jester of a great king. And I intend to be the greatest jester who ever lived.”

Leavetaking

“The king is preoccupied of late, Trocero.”

“Aye, Prospero. He is not as jovial in the flush of victory as I would expect him to be.”

“True. One would look for it to cheer him, and yet he seems glummer than ever. What, I wonder, is eating at him?”

The two noblemen, taking their noon wine on the terrace overlooking the palace entry, pondered in silence a moment. Trocero sat on a weathered wooden chair, his shoulders hunched forward, his elbows braced on his knees, letting the sun warm his broad back. Prospero assumed a more courtly posture, standing with one foot propped in a crenellation of the battlement as he surveyed the leisurely bustle of the palace yard below.

“Perhaps,” Trocero declared, “it is the baneful influence of that noxious dwarf he has taken to his bosom.

I trust not Delvyn.”

“You think him a spy?” Prospero asked, stepping down and shifting around to make a seat of the embrasure.

“A spy?” the count asked. “Yes, to be sure, if listening goggle-eared and spreading outrageous slanders is spying. As to what it may avail him, why—that is hard to say, since he has little commerce with anyone at court except the king.”

“He has told us much about our enemies,” Prospero said. “None of it is provably false.”

“Aye, precisely, the better to insinuate himself into our trust! By now he knows enough about our plans to make him a peril to us if he were freed. That, me-thinks, is why Conan has ceased to talk of ransoming him back to Nemedra.”

“Ah, well.” Prospero shifted sidewise to lean back against the warm stone. “He is too small and too conspicuous to be an assassin. Mayhap the king is only burdened by the weight of middling years and too-easy triumphs. After all, Trocero, ’tis hardly unusual for a king to enlist the services of a court jester or a fool.” “Yes, but mark me, this one does not jest and he is no fool.” The count finished his wine and set the tankard down beside his chair. “He has a treacherous way of ferreting out a man’s weaknesses and playing on them. Who can know what part he played in his former king’s downfall in battle? And the way he treats Conan with open contempt... I, for one, find it revolting!” “Come, fellow! Such is the value of a jester, as well you know. A king, especially one as great as Conan, needs relief from constant flattery. He enjoys being taken down a notch or two! He craves laughter at his own expense, which full-sized men like us can ill afford to offer him.”

“That were well spoken, if the midget really cheered the king. But he seems to do the opposite over the long haul at least. Do you remember how we would hear that damnable twanging and plunking from Conan’s vicinity every moment—in his tent at Tybor, and on the march home? Just listen!” Trocero glanced up toward the window of the east tower, whence even then the faint, eerie strains of a lute could be heard. “Mitra knows what devilment he is whispering in the king’s ear, and what sorcerous spells his foreign music is weaving!”

“Now, now, my good count,” Prospero laughed, “have a little faith in our king! No man is leery of sorcery than Conan. And what weakness can he possibly have for such an ill-favoured little imp to play on, as the victorious king of a thriving realm, and head of a devoted court and family? Let us observe Conan in our meeting today, and see if his judgement of military and diplomatic affairs

weak or spiritless. If so, we can speak to him; otherwise let him enjoy his dwarf. There are great issues at foot which will serve as a test of his kingship.”

It was late dusk by the look of the sky—or else pale night. But not Aquilonian night; something about the wan colour of the heavens low down near the horizon, and the mournful souging of the wind through the stones, seemed to preclude that. Halfway up toward the zenith, a watery disc moon glared down. Framed by looming black pillars, it cast faint shadows of ruined Cyclopean stonework across the cracked pavement of the courtyard.

The wind was gusty and piercing, but there was no vegetation to be vexed by it—not even grass stalks to wave, or dry husks of leaves to be frightened about the enclosure. The restlessness of the air was visible only in the changing traceries of pale dust blowing over the fractured stones, and in the rippling of dark water in a low-curbed pool at the centre of the court.

The lone figure walked slowly forward, looking timid and small in the vastness of the ruins. He was undersized, frail and stunted even for a puny mortal in this abode of forgotten gods.

“Kthantos?” the thin voice called out, squeaking in its essay at boldness. “Elder One, why am I brought here? I have not conjured you, Kthantos!”

The answer to his question was not spoken. Rather, it bubbled up, surfacing in oily splatters from the centre of the black pool that spread before the questioner.

“Conjured, you say?” The cracked glottal sounds were punctuated by laughter, which gushed forth in a thick-bubbled geyser. “Men conjure demons, mortal! Gods conjure men.”

“Always before this I have invoked you.” The small, hunched figure halted at a judicious distance from the pool’s rim. The breeze had abated, yet the pond’s dark waters stirred restlessly from the bubbling. “Can it be that your strength waxes greater already, Kthantos?” “As a god’s strength should,” the low-pitched accents burred, “who has more followers than he formerly had.”

“One more follower, at least,” the mortal visitor mused aloud with a note of scepticism in his voice. “Hmm, from zero to one is an immeasurably large increase. So you should feel infinitely stronger—for the time, at least.”

“For your lifetime, at least,” the black water gurgled back mockingly in reply, “pathetically short as it will be, compared to mine.” And yet, on more careful inspection, the pool might not have been filled with water after all. Its bubbles and ripples seemed to have a thicker, oilier quality, like that of molten pitch. “After all,” the voice spoke on, “I possess your unalterable belief.”

“Perhaps, Elder One,” the visitor added disputatiously. “Even so, my devotion to you might faltersomeday.”

“If not through devotion, then through simple fear I own you. Having once believed, mortal, can you cease to do so by an act of will?” The pool’s contents roiled, forming black wavelets that lapped the stone rim with a hint of menace. “Remember, a weak god is a jealous one. One who punishes his forswearers harshly. A fat, complacent deity like Tarim or Mitra can afford to let a few followers lapse, but not I! And even in my former supremacy, I was no god of mercy....”

“Yes, yes, Kthantos,” the mortal said with a valiant show of boredom. “You told me already of your vast powers and cruelties of old. Pray, do not exert yourself so greatly to frighten me, lest I begin to regret that I ever resurrected your name and rite... out of a crumbling, scarcely legible scroll, which had lain forgotten in a catacomb for countless centuries.”

“Indeed, mortal,” the disembodied voice said, “well may you taunt me with memories of my long glory.” The pond bubbled idly, tossing a reflection of the pale moon hither and back across its surface like a child’s plaything. “Yet I caution you: even in my present state I retain more than enough power to slay any mortal, swiftly or slowly, as I may choose. Short of that, I could withdraw the boon I have already bestowed upon you—”

“Enough of this idiotic sparring!” The listener spoke with sudden, daring vehemence. “Tell me

why have you called me here? Or have you forgotten, in your doddering ancientness?"

"Why else, but to hear of your schemes and successes?" The voice in the pool bubbled awkwardly to a stop, as if embarrassed to request any favour of a mortal, or to admit any lack of omniscience. "What of this new king?" it asked finally in a reluctant, oily spurt.

"He is promising, most promising indeed, and receptive to my influence." The human crossed his arms with an air of relaxed certainty. "Even so, there are other possibilities—younger ones who may be more energetic and malleable. Shortly I will begin to test this one's strength and resolve." The visitor laughed. "I have already told him the gods are on his side."

"So they are," the pool blurted, "one god at least. Though I am an ancient god, a mere shade of my former self. That will soon change. I shall take my place among these upstart Hyborian deities and in time supplant them—"

"Yes, yes," the visitor agreed. "But only through my efforts, remember. For now, instead of reminiscing, try to bring your full, senile strength to bear on my behalf. Let there be no more talk of divine punishments. If I fail or die, remember, so will you." "Speak not of failure, 'tis heresy!" Kthantos proclaimed from his bubbling pit. Beyond the pond, above jagged stumps of pillars, a new disc was rising into the sky. A second moon—or could it be a sun? 'Twas hard to think it one, so it seemed so wan and blighted, its glow barely paling the clear, starless dome of sky. Meanwhile, the submerged voice continued its gurgling.

"Have faith in me, mortal! Serve me as my loyal minion, and divine justice will ultimately triumph. Fret yourself not about this puny king; if he fails, he will but lead us to a stronger one!"

"This border war appears to have been one of the lesser threats our dynasty has faced, O King."

Queen Zenobia sat at ease on the alabaster garden bench, the late afternoon sun picking out the bluish lustre in her long black hair. The white stone of the bench and the frothy, flowing whiteness of her gown contrasted sharply with her raven tresses, making her fair limbs look dusky tan.

"Though you were gone less than a fortnight, Conan, we missed you sorely."

"You could have ridden along with me, Zenobia, if you so wished." Conan sat poised on an alabaster seat opposite his wife. In contrast to her languor, his posture seemed alert and vigilant, his sandalled feet braced firmly underneath his backless bench. A jewelled dagger-belt, donned as an ornament for his meeting with his counsellors, bound a shirt and kilt of kingly purple about his torso and a gleaming gold circlet crowned his black-maned head. "Conn might have come along with me, in any case. He is getting to be of an age..."

"Milord, I hardly think so. He is but an infant!" Zenobia's tone was gently disbelieving.

"Well, mayhap not." He watched their son playing idly by the splashing, lotus-carved fountain that served the sunny south-west wing of the palace. "And yet, by his growth," Conan said, "my memory plays me true, I was hunting and fishing alone in mountain glades." The king shook his crowned head. "Needless to say, I knew little of scribbery, counting, and the other civilized arts he is learning—except to count the number of man-tracks left by a Vanir raiding party, and to notch my spear haft once for each rabbit I killed."

Young Conn's interest in the water was, quite evidently, only secondary; he seemed more fascinated by the hunched figure of the dwarf Delvyn, who sat brooding at the far side of the fountain, staring into its crystalline depths. At length, craftily, the boy launched an emerald-bright oak leaf into the rippling pool. Prodding and blowing it slowly and tentatively toward the object of his interest, he edged after it along the circular marble curb.

"A spirited life, it was! I know, Zenobia," Conan resumed, "that your best strength lies in running the palace and certain domestic affairs of the kingdom. It takes up much of your time—but 'tis a good thing, perhaps, since I have so little patience with those matters." He laughed and shifted restlessly on his stone seat. "At times, there almost seems no use for me here. Petty daily concerns weigh me down

worse than any crisis, and too much lazing about the court only makes me feel the ache of my past wounds.”

“Conan,” the queen replied softly, “I am aware that you pine for battle. Sometimes I think you love adventuring better than you love me. Even a great hunt or a fighting tourney seems only to whet your cravings.” Conan nodded. “In some ways, Zenobia, this attack from the east has been a boon for us. It proved the value of my recent shake-up of the army, and that I still command the respect to lead it.”

“Two things I never doubted,” the queen said. “Nor anyone else in the kingdom but yourself, would guess.” She heaved a small sigh and smiled tenderly, leaning closer to her husband. “Conan, you need not fear ruling a land at peace, or dealing with the courtiers, or just... growing old here. Your judgement is as sound as theirs or mine, Mitra knows. Your friends and subjects do not love you only for your wealth and power, darling, or out of fear of your fighting prowess! They revere you as a good king, a man of mirth and charity, with so many joys and accomplishments ahead of you— But oh, my poor child, what is the matter?”

Her attention was distracted; for young Conn, having finally ventured near the brooding Delvyn, had not stayed in his vicinity long. Now he came scuffling up to his mother, teary-eyed and pouting. Plumping down on the bench beside the queen, he buried his head in the soft fabric of her billowing gown. She enfolded him in her arms and pressed his face to her bosom.

“Always crying—perhaps he is a babe yet, after all,” Conan said resignedly. “Old enough to carry a spear, and still he wants to cuddle his mama! Such conduct would have been thought unseemly in my home clan.” The king shook his head. “But then, who can say what is right in a civilized land?”

“Milord, he is only a child!” The queen spoke with quiet, offended dignity. “You too have sought refuge in these arms at times, sir, against this same breast. It ill befits a grown man, king or not, to be jealous of a boy!”

“Aye, perhaps ’tis so.” Conan nodded again, looking up to meet her sternly protective gaze. “Zenobia, I must tell you, this war with Ophir and Nemedi... it is not over yet.” He shook his head decisively. “The doings to eastward are too turbulent, and far too perilous, for Aquilonia not to take the hand. So at least my agents tell me. I may be gone longer this time—and it must be soon. We shall move swiftly.”

“Aye, milord, I feared as much.” The queen shook her head and hugged Conn, who looked large-eyed from her to his father. “By your agents, Conan, do you mean the turncoat Delvyn?” Her gaze shifted to where the dwarf’s limber form squatted, having moved into the shade of one of the orchard trees.

“Yes, among others. Publius and the rest are in agreement. The jester’s information has been most useful to us.” Conan digested her remark soberly. “But Zenobia, Delvyn has been nothing but a pawn or slave until now, with little choice of masters. I think he is ready to be of greater service to me.”

“Perhaps.” The queen nodded, fondling Conn’s hair, which was as black as that of either of his parents. “But please, Conan, when you go adventuring, take your dwarf with you. I do not trust him here with us.”

The Feast of Steel

The next morning the king departed Tarantia. Resplendent in a new set of black and gold armour he spurred his new black charger Shalmanezer at the head of a sizeable body of troops—an escort fully as large, in fact, as the force which had marched from the capital to secure the border a fortnight before. Most of the survivors of that army had remained in the south-east, but here the royal legion was joined by masses of Gunder and Bossonian footsoldiers slow in arriving from the northern and western borders. Additionally came new levies on horse and foot alike, out of the farms and forests of central Aquilonia, to be commanded by sleek knights freshly outfitted from among the city nobles and rural squires.

The people of Tarantia, though uncertain as to the threat this new legion was to counter, made a brave showing at their departure. They furnished flower-petals to rain down from the rooftops, and copious tears to stain the breasts and gauntlets of departing lovers. There rang forth cheers, too, and laughter, especially at the sight of the dwarfish armoured man astride a shaggy-maned, undersized swamp pony. He struggled to stay in the saddle beside the heroic figure of the mounted King Conan.

High above the melee presided Queen Zenobia, standing on a flower-decked parapet of the palace with young Prince Conn at her side. Gravely she watched Conan canter down the Road of Kings, as she had first watched him so long ago, years before her queen-ship.

The march south-eastward was swift, favoured by fine spring weather. Local landholders, though surprised at the size of the force, provisioned it liberally out of respect for the king. All along the way the army waxed stronger with new companies of horsemen and battalions of foot-bourne volunteers from the rich southern provinces.

By the night of their arrival at the Tybor camp, the legions guarding the border had already launched new attacks against Ophir. On orders sent ahead by courier, Aquilonian detachments had driven deep into ill-defended territory. The news gleaned from scouts and prisoners was sobering.

“King Balt rests for now with Malvin at Ianthe, but his departure northward seems imminent.” Spoke the field courier Egilrude, newly returned from the front. “Both the Ophirean and Nemedian troops are demoralized and falling back toward the capital. Our prisoners tell us the city is in mortal imminent danger from the east, where the Kothian Prince Armiro is advancing swiftly and wreaking great carnage. The prisoners seem eager to cooperate, being more afraid of Armiro than of the Aquilonians. Our scouts estimate that it will take the Kothian force two or three days to reach the city gate.”

“So,” Conan declared to his assembled counsellors, “it appears that we are now in a race for Ianthe, with time yapping at our heels. I was a great fool not to follow up at once on our initial victory.”

“You would take the capital, then, Your Majesty?” General Ottobrand asked. “And likely, most of Ophir to boot? That would be splendid, Sire! But I must tell you, we can scarce move an army to Ianthe in less than seven days, even with only scattered enemy resistance.” The general, a grey-haired Gunderman in steel armour and a cloak of stitched furs, leaned forward over a folding table and poked a scarred forefinger at a map of Ophir. “The Kothians, our scouts tell us, enjoy a broad front. They may hurl their cavalry through gaps and weak areas and outpace the enemy. But we are forced to send everything we have straight up the Road of Kings, where it can be stalled by even half-spirited defenders at the castles and bridges, or by a spoiling cavalry assault or two. Why, the mere logistics of moving

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