

THE SAVAGE
SWORD OF
CONAN
DEC. № 16



The **SAVAGE SWORD of** **CONAN** TM **THE BARBARIAN**

**ALL NEW
ACTION-EPIC!
WIZARDS
OF THE
BLACK
CIRCLE**



**ALSO-AT LAST!
WORMS OF
THE EARTH**



THE PEOPLE OF THE BLACK CIRCLE



Script: ROY THOMAS Art: JOHN BUSCEMA and ALFREDO ALCALA

ADAPTED FROM THE STORY BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

THRU THE HOT STIFLING NIGHT
THE TEMPLE GONGS BOOM,
AND THE CONCHES ROAR.



THEIR CLAMOR IS A
FAINT ECHO IN
THE GOLD-DOMED
CHAMBER...

AND STILL BHUNDA CHAND
STRUGGLES WITH INNER
TORMENT THERE ON THE
VELVET-CUSHIONED DIAS,
BEADS OF SWEAT GUSTENING
ON HIS DARK SKIN...



... HIS EYES
DILATED WITH
THE NEARNESS
OF DEATH.

... WHERE THE KING OF
VENDHYA LIES DYING.

TREMBLING SLAVE GIRLS KNEEL
AT THE FOOT OF THE KING'S BED
OF AGONY-- AND THE WAZIR,
A NOBLE GROWN OLD IN THE
ROYAL COURT, LOOKS ON
WITH SAD EYES.



AND, LEANING FORWARD
IN HER ORNATE CHAIR,
WATCHING HER DYING
BROTHER WITH PASSIONATE
INTENSITY IS THE DEVI
YASMINA...

DAMN THE PRIESTS AND THEIR
CLAMOR! THEY ARE NO WISER
THAN THE LEECHES, WHO
ARE HELPLESS!

NAY, HE DIES-- AND NONE CAN
SAY WHY! AND I STAND HERE
POWERLESS, WHO WOULD BURN
THE WHOLE CITY AND SPILL THE
BLOOD OF THOUSANDS TO
SAVE HIM!



NOT A MAN
OF AYODHYA
BUT WOULD DIE
IN HIS PLACE
IF IT MIGHT
BE, DEVI.

THIS
POISON--

I TELL YOU IT IS **NOT** POISON!

SINCE HIS BIRTH HE HAS BEEN
GUARDED SO CLOSELY THAT
THE CLEVEREST POISONERS OF
THE EAST COULD NOT
REACH HIM!

IT IS **SORCERY** THAT
IS KILLING MY
BROTHER--

BLACK,
GHASTLY
MAGIC--!





**YASMINA, MY SISTER--
WHERE ARE YOU??**

**I
CANNOT
FIND
YOU!**

**ALL IS DARKNESS,
AND THE ROARING
OF GREAT
WINDS--!**

**BROTHER!
I AM HERE!**

**DO YOU NOT
KNOW ME?**

**BUT, HER VOICE DIES
AS A LOW, CONFUSED
MOANING WANES FROM
THE KING'S MOUTH...**



**... AND AS SHE
LOOKS UPON THE
UTTER VACANCY
OF HIS FACE.**



**THEN, AS THE SLAVE-
GIRLS WHIMPER WITH
FEAR, YASMINA LOWERS
HER HEAD IN SILENT
ANGUISH.**



WHILE, IN ANOTHER PART OF THE CITY...

**THE KING IS NOT YET
DEAD, BUT THE DIRGE
IS SOUNDED.**

**THE PEOPLE
KNOW HE WILL
NEVER SEE ANOTHER
DAWN.**



**WHAT I CANNOT
UNDERSTAND IS
WHY I HAVE HAD
TO WAIT SO
LONG FOR YOUR
MASTERS TO
STRIKE.**

**WHY COULD THEY NOT HAVE
SLAIN HIM
MONTHS
AGO?**

**EVEN THE ARTS
YOU CALL *SORCERY*
ARE GOVERNED BY
COSMIC LAWS,
KERIM SHAH...**



**NOT UNTIL THE HEAVENS WERE
IN THE PROPER ORDER COULD
THEY PERFORM THIS DARK
NECROMANCY.**

**THE SLANT OF THE
MOON PRESAGED EVIL
FOR THE KING OF
VENDHYA: THE STARS
ARE IN TURMOIL, THE
SERPENT IN THE
HOUSE OF THE
ELEPHANT.**



DURING SUCH JUXTAPOSITIONS, THE **INVISIBLE GUARDIANS** ARE REMOVED FROM THE SPIRIT OF **BHUNDA CHAND**.

THUS, ONCE A **POINT OF CONTACT** WAS ESTABLISHED, **mighty powers** were put in play along a path opened to **UNSEEN REALMS**.

"POINT OF CONTACT?"
DO YOU MEAN THAT **LOCK OF BHUNDA CHAND'S HAIR**?

ALL DISCARDED PORTIONS OF THE HUMAN BODY STILL REMAIN PART OF IT, ATTACHED TO IT BY **INTANGIBLE CONNECTIONS**.

THE **PRIESTS OF ASURA** HAVE A DIM INKLING OF THIS TRUTH: SO, ALL HAIR, NAIL-TRIMMINGS, AND OTHER WASTE PRODUCTS OF THE **ROYAL FAMILY** ARE CAREFULLY REDUCED TO ASHES AND THE ASHES **HIDDEN**.



YES...



STILL, WE **OBTAINED** A LOCK OF **BHUNDA CHAND'S HAIR**, AND SENT IT UP THE LONG, LONG ROAD TO **PESHKHAURI**, THEN UP THE **ZHAIBAR PASS**, UNTIL IT REACHED THE HANDS OF THOSE FOR WHOM IT WAS **INTENDED...**



AND THUS, BY A LOCK OF HAIR, A **SOUL** IS DRAWN FROM ITS BODY AND ACROSS THE GULFS OF **ECHOING SPACE**.

I DO NOT KNOW IF YOU ARE A **MAN** OR A **DEMON**. **KHEMSA**.

BUT THEN, **FEW** OF US ARE WHAT WE **SEEM**.

NO MAN IN ALL OF **VENDHYA** KNOWS THAT IN REALITY I SERVE **KING YEZOIGERD OF TURAN!**

AND I THE **BLACK SEERS** OF **YIMSHA**.

AND MY MASTERS ARE **GREATER** THAN YOURS, FOR THEY HAVE ACCOMPLISHED BY THEIR ARTS WHAT **YEZOIGERD** COULD NOT WITH A **HUNDRED THOUSAND SWORDS**.



OUTSIDE, THE MOAN
OF THE TORTURED
MULTITUDES
SHUDDERS UP TO
THE STARS...



... AND THE
CONCHES
BELLOW LIKE
OXEN IN PAIN.

ALL THE NOBLE-BORN FIGHTING-
MEN OF AYODHYA ARE GATHERED
IN OR ABOUT THE GREAT PALACE,
CURVED SWORDS AT THE READY...



BUT DEATH STALKS THRU THE
ROYAL PALACE, AND NONE CAN
STAY HIS GHOSTLY TREAD.



YASMINA--!

WHAT IS IT,
MY BROTHER?
YOU SOUND
SO FAINT...!
SO FAR
AWAY...!

AID ME! WIZARDS HAVE
DRAWN MY SOUL FAR FROM
MY MORTAL HOUSE.

THEY SEEK TO SNAP THE *SILVER CORD*
THAT BINDS ME TO MY *DYING BODY*!



WH-WHAT IS *THIS*
THEY BRING BEFORE
ME NOW?

AHIE
OH, MY
BROTHER--!



SWIFTLY, YASMINA! I KNOW NOW THAT I HAVE
BEEN *ENSORCELED* BY THE *WIZARD OF*
THE *HIMELIANS*!

THEY SEEK TO THRUST MY
SOUL INTO THE BODY OF A FOUL
NIGHT-WEIRD THEIR SORCERY
HAS SUMMONED FROM *HELL*!

THEY WOULD SEEK TO *SLAY*
MY BODY--AND *DAWN MY*
SOUL! ONLY YOU CAN
HELP ME!



WHAT CAN I DO, BHUNDA
CHAND? *TELL ME!!*



CHUNDER SHAN,
GOVERNOR OF
PESHKHAUR,
HAS RULED THIS
NORTHERN
PROVINCE OF
VENDHYA FOR
SO LONG ONLY
BECAUSE HE
WEIGHS CARE-
FULLY HIS EVERY
WORD, SPOKEN
OR WRITTEN...
AND NEVER
MORE SO
THAN NOW...



"LET IT BE KNOWN TO YOUR
EXCELLENCY THAT I HAVE FAITH-
FULLY CARRIED OUT YOUR
EXCELLENCY'S INSTRUCTIONS:

"THE SEVEN
OUTLAW TRIBES-
MEN ARE WELL
GUARDED IN THEIR
PRISON, BUT THEIR
CHIEF HAS NOT
ANSWERED MY CALL
FOR A PERSONAL
MEETING TO BARGAIN
FOR THEIR RELEASE."
I--"



EH? WHO'S
THERE--?



HOW THE DEVIL DID
YOU GET IN HERE?



BE YOU TRUE WOMAN,
OR MAN IN HELLISH
DISGUISE--

IF YOU'VE COME
HERE TO FREE
THOSE FOOLS WE'VE
CAPTURED, I'LL
SOON--



DEVI!

You!?



YOUR MAJESTY, THIS WAS
MOST UNWISE, WITH THE
BORDER STILL UNSETTLED
AND RAIDS FROM THE
HILLS INCESSANT.

YOU CAME
WITH A
LARGE
RETINUE?

AN AMPLE ONE
FOLLOWED ME TO
THE CITY.

I LODGED MY
PEOPLE THERE
AND CAME ON TO
THE FORT WITH
ONLY MY MAID,
GITARA.



DEVI, YOU DO NOT UNDER-
STAND THE PERIL.

AN HOUR'S RIDE
FROM THIS SPOT,
THE HILLS SWARM
WITH **BARBARIANS**
WHO MURDER
AND RAPE--!

YET I
AM HERE,
AND UN-
HARMED.

I SHOWED MY SIGNET
RING TO YOUR GUARDS
AND THEY ADMITTED ME,
SUPPOSING ME A **SECRET**
COURIER FROM THE
CAPITAL AT **AYODHYA**.

NOW, LET US NOT
WASTE TIME: YOU
HAVE RECEIVED **NO**
WORD FROM THE
CHIEF OF THE
BARBARIANS?

NONE SAVE **THREATS**
AND **CURSES**, DEVI.
I WAS JUST **WRITING**
YOU...

HE **MUST**
BE BROUGHT
TO **TERMS**!

I DO NOT **UNDER-
STAND**, YOUR
EXCELLENCY.

WHEN I CHANCED TO **CAPTURE**
THOSE SEVEN HILLMEN, I REPORTED
THEIR CAPTURE TO THE **WAZAM**;
THEN, BEFORE I COULD HANG
THEM, THERE CAME AN ORDER
TO **COMMUNICATE** INSTEAD
WITH THEIR **CHIEF**.

THESE MEN ARE
OF THE TRIBE OF
AFGHULIS, WHILE
HE IS A FOREIGNER
FROM THE **WEST**,
CALLED **CONAN**.

BUT, WHY
YOU WISH
TO SEE
HIM, I
DON'T--

DO YOU FEAR THE
BLACK SEERS
OF **YIMSHA**?

A-AYE, DEVI! WHO DOES NOT?

THEY ARE **DEVILS**,
HAUNTING THE UNIN-
HABITED HILLS BEYOND
THE **ZHAIBAR**--BUT
THE SAGES SAY THEY
SELDOM INTERFERE
IN THE LIVES OF
MORTAL MEN.

I KNOW THAT THE
KING OF
VENDHYA WAS
DESTROYED BY
THE **MAGIC** OF
THE **BLACK**
SEERS.

WHY THEY SLEW MY
BROTHER, I KNOW NOT--
BUT I HAVE SWORN TO
SLAY THEM IN TURN!

BUT NO **ARMY**--
NOT EVEN OF **HILL-
MEN**--WOULD
DARE APPROACH
THEIR **UNHOLY**
MOUNTAIN,
DEVI!

THEY FEAR THEM--!

DOES THEIR CHIEF, **CONAN**,
FEAR THEM?

I DOUBT THERE
IS ANYTHING
THAT DEVIL
FEARS.

SO I HAVE BEEN **TOLD**. THEN,
HE MUST **RANSOM** HIS SEVEN
SUB-CHIEFS... WITH THE
HEADS OF THE **BLACK**
SEERS!

ONE MAN **ALONE**
MAY HOPE TO
ACCOMPLISH WHAT
AN **ARMY** CANNOT.

MAY I ASK
WHAT **THIS**
HAS TO DO
WITH--?



TRUE, EXCELLENCY--NOR CAN WE SPARE AN ARMY EASILY IN THESE DAYS WHEN THE KING OF TURAN IS PLOTTING TO GAIN SOME OF OUR NORTHERN CITIES.

NOW, MAY I ESCORT YOU TO YOUR QUARTERS?

COME, GITARA.

YES, DEVI.

SOON, THE TASK DONE, CHUNDER SHAN RETURNS TO HIS CHAMBER...



...WHERE HE IS TEARING HIS NOW-USELESS LETTER TO BITS...



... WHEN SUDDENLY--

WHO'S THERE--?



DON'T MAKE A SOUND--

--OR I'LL SEND THE DEVIL A HENCHMAN!

THE GOVERNOR CHECKS HIS MOTION TOWARD THE SWORD ON THE TABLE...

YOU WERE WELL ADVISED NOT TO MAKE A GRAB FOR THAT BLADE, CHUNDER SHAN.

FOR, HE IS WITHIN REACH OF THE FOOT-LONG ZHANGBAR KNIFE THAT GLITTERS IN THE INTRUDER'S FIST.



YOUR ACCENT-- AND MANNER--

YOU ARE THE WESTERN BARBARIAN--

THE ONE THEY CALL CONAN?



WHO **ELSE?** YOU SENT WORD INTO THE HILLS THAT YOU WISHED TO **PARLEY** WITH ME.

WELL, BY CROM, I'VE **COME...**



...AND I WANT MY **MEN!**

YOU REFUSED THE **RANSOM** I OFFERED.

WHAT THE DEVIL DO YOU **WANT**, IF IT ISN'T **GOLD?**



GOLD? THERE IS MORE GOLD IN **PESHKHAURI** THAN ANY **AFGHULI** EVER SAW.

WHY SHOULD WE DESIRE **GOLD?**

IT WOULD BE **MORE** TO OUR ADVANTAGE TO **HANG** THOSE SEVEN THIEVES.



WATCH YOUR **TONGUE!** I'VE HALF A NOTION TO **SPLIT YOUR HEAD** LIKE A RIPE **MELON!**

Y--YOU CAN KILL **ME** EASILY... AND PERHAPS ESCAPE OVER THE **WALL** LATER.

BUT THAT WOULD NOT SAVE THE **PRISONERS** WHO WERE **HEADMEN** AMONG THE **AFGHULS!**



I **KNOW** IT. THE TRIBE IS BAYING LIKE **WOLVES** AT MY HEELS BECAUSE I'VE NOT PROCURED THEIR **RELEASE.**

TELL ME IN **PLAIN WORDS** WHAT YOU WANT--BECAUSE, CROM TAKE ME, IF THERE'S NO **OTHER** WAY, I'LL RAISE A HORDE AND LEAD IT TO THE VERY **GATES** OF **PESHKHAURI!**

TH--THERE IS ANOTHER WAY...

NAME IT!



THERE IS A **MISSION** YOU MUST PERFORM. IT--

THAT **SOUND!**

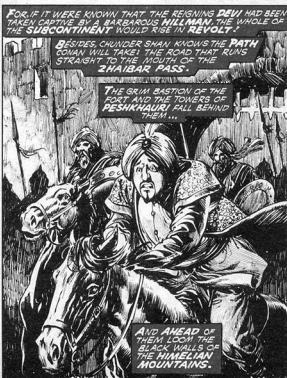
SOMEONE AT THE **DOOR--**



WITH THE SPEED OF A HILL-PANTHER, THE BRONZE BARBARIAN IS ACROSS THE CHAMBER--



NOW DARE TO HANG MY MEN!



PART III THE SORCERY OF KHEMSA



IN THE REIGNING
CONFUSION, NO ONE
NOTICES THAT THE
DEVIL'S ATTENDANT
GITARA, SLIPS OUT
THE GREAT-ARCHED
GATE OF THE
FORTRESS...

...AND RUSHES TOWARD
THE NEARBY CITY, AS
SWIFTLY AS IF SHE WERE
A TRAINED MASCUINE
RUNNER.



AVOIDING THE OPEN ROAD,
SHE CUTS THRU FIELDS
AND OVER SLOPES...

...TO ARRIVE AT A CERTAIN POINT ON THE
FAR SIDE OF THE CITY CALLED PESHKHAURI.



THEN, SHE MAKES HER WAY
DOWN THE STEEP HILLSIDE
WITH CONSIDERABLE SKILL...

...AND STANDS AT LAST
AT A CERTAIN POINT
WHERE THE SPIRE OF A
TOWER IS VISIBLE ABOVE
THE BATTLEMENTS.



THEN, PLACING HER HANDS
TO HER MOUTH, SHE VOICES
A LOW, WEIRD CALL
WHICH CARRIES STRANGELY.



ALMOST INSTANTLY, A
HEAD APPEARS AT AN
EMBRASURE HIGH ABOVE.
THEN, IT VANISHES...



... AND A ROPE COMES WRIGGLING DOWN THE WALL.

QUICKLY AND SMOOTHLY, SHE IS DRAWN UP THE SHEER STONE CURTAIN...



... AMID THE ENFOLDING SILENCE.



THE MAN AT THE TOP SHOWS NO STRANGE FROM HAVING JUST HAILED A FULL-GROWN WOMAN UP A FORTY-FOOT WALL.

HAI, KHEMA! WHERE IS KERIM SHAH?

ASLEEP IN THE HOUSE BELOW.

YOU HAVE NEWS?



CONAN HAS STOLEN THE DEVI OUT OF THE FORTRESS, AND CARRIED HER AWAY INTO THE HILLS!

KERIM SHAH WILL BE GLAD TO HEAR THAT.

THE MAN CALLED KHEMA SHOWS NO EMOTION AT THE GIRL'S TORRENT OF GASPED WORDS.



WAIT!

EH?

DO NOT TELL THE TURANIAN! LET US USE THIS KNOWLEDGE OURSELVES!

THE GOVERNOR HAS RIDDEN OFF INTO THE HILLS, BUT HE MIGHT AS WELL CHASE A GHOST-- AND HE'S TOLD NO ONE IT WAS THE DEVI WHO WAS KIDNAPPER!

NO ONE IN PESHKAURI OR THE FORT KNOWS IT BUT US!



BUT WHAT GOOD DOES IT DO US? MY MASTERS SENT ME WITH KERIM SHAH TO AID HIM IN EVERY WAY...

AID YOURSELF INSTEAD. SHAKE OFF YOUR YOKE, KHEMA.



YOU MEAN-- DISOBEY MY MASTERS?

BETRAY THE BLACK SEERS?

EVEN THERE IN THE NIGHT, GITARA CAN SENSE HIS WHOLE BODY TURNING CHILL AT THE THOUGHT.



THE MOMENT THE CONSPIRATORS TREAD HAS FADED, THE MAN ON THE COUCH SITS UP, WIPING THE SWEAT FROM HIS FACE.

A KNIFE-THRUST HE DOES NOT DREAD; BUT HE FEARS KHEMSA AS A MAN FEARS A POISONOUS REPTILE.

PEOPLE WHO PLOT ON ROOFS SHOULD REMEMBER TO LOWER THEIR VOICES!

BUT, SINCE KHEMSA HAS NOW TURNED AGAINST HIS MASTERS, AND SINCE HE WAS MY ONLY CONTACT WITH THE BLACK SEERS--

--FROM NOW ON, I PLAY THE GAME MY OWN WAY.

"TO KHOSRU KHAN, GOVERNOR OF SECUNDERAM, KINGDOM OF TURAN--

"THE CIMMERIAN CONAN HAS CARRIED THE DEVI YASMINA TO THE VILLAGES OF THE AFGHULIS.

THIS IS OUR OPPORTUNITY TO GET THE DEVI IN OUR HANDS, AS KING YEZDIGERD HAS SO LONG DESIRED.

I'LL MEET YOU IN THE VALLEY OF GURASHAH WITH NATIVE GUIDES.

"SEND THREE THOUSAND HORSEMEN AT ONCE...

HE HAS SIGNED THE LETTER WITH A NAME WHICH IS NOT IN THE LEAST LIKE KERIM SHAH.





THE PRISON
QUARTERS
OF FESHKHAURI
ARE SEPARATE
FROM THE REST
OF THE CITY BY
A MASSIVE
WALL, IN
WHICH IS SET
A SINGLE
IRON-BOUND
DOOR.

THE WARRIOR
ON GUARD IS
ONLY YAWNING,
NOT DOZING...
OR SO HE
THINKS...

YET, IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE, A
LAMBERT-EYED MAN IS STANDING
BEFORE HIM.

WHO
GOES
THERE?

WHAT
ARE YOU
OBLIGED
TO DO,
WARRIOR?

WHY--TO
GUARD THE
GATE!



YOU LIE! YOU ARE OBLIGED
TO OBEY ME.

YOU HAVE LOOKED INTO MY
EYES, AND YOUR SOUL IS NO
LONGER YOUR OWN.

OPEN
THAT
DOOR!

YES...



BID HIM FETCH
US HORSES.
KHEMSA.

NO NEED
OF THAT.

I HAVE NO MORE USE
FOR YOU NOW.

KILL
YOURSELF!

YES...



THEN,
PLACING
ITS KEEN
HEAD
AGAINST
HIS RIBS,
HE BEGINS
SLOWLY,
STOLIDLY,
TO LEAN
AGAINST
IT--

--TILL HE SLIDES DOWN IT, AND IT TRANSFIXES HIS BODY--



--LIKE A
HORRIBLE
STALK-
GROWING
OUT OF
HIS BACK.

THE GIRL HAS STARED AT ALL THIS IN MORBID FASCINATION-- BUT, MOMENTS LATER, KHEMSA TAKES HER HAND--



-- AND LEADS HER THRU THE GATE, INTO THE PRISON CORRIDORS BEYOND.

THE GUARD WITHIN IS SO SECURE IN HIS KNOWLEDGE OF THE PRISON'S STRENGTH THAT HE SUSPECTS NOTHING-- TILL IT IS TOO LATE.



WHO THE DEVIL?



KHEMSA DOES NOT WASTE TIME IN KRYPTISM, THOUGH HIS ACTION SAVORS OF MAGIC TO THE GIRL.

HE FLICKS THE SPEAR ASIDE AS A MAN MIGHT FLICK A STRAW--



AND, WITH HIS OTHER HAND, HE SEEMS SO-GENTLY TO TOUCH THE WARRIOR'S NECK, AS IF IN PASSING.

THE GUARD PITCHES ON HIS FACE WITHOUT A SOUND...



...HIS HEAD LOLLING ON A BROKEN NECK.

SOUNDLESSLY, KHEMSA ADVANCES NOW TOWARD A METAL DOOR...



...WHICH BUCKLES INWARD WITH A RENDING SHUDDER...



...BENEATH THE MEREST TOUCH OF HIS OPEN HAND.

A THOUSAND-POUND BATTERING
RAM COULD HAVE SHATTERED IT
NO MORE COMPLETELY.

KHEMSA IS
DRUNK WITH
FREEDOM, AND
THE EXERCISE
OF HIS
SORCEROUS
POWER.

A WIDE GRILLE
OF IRON BARS
LOOKS THRU
THE DOORWAY--

AND THE HANDS
THAT GRIP THEM
ARE OF THE HUE
OF THE AFGHULI
HILLMEN.

KHEMSA STANDS SILENT
FOR A SPACE, GAZING INTO
THE SHADOWS--

THEN, HIS HAND
VANISHES A
SECOND INTO
HIS ROBE...

...TO EMERGE
HOLDING A SHIM-
MERING BALL OF
SPARKLING
DUST...

...WHICH HE DROPS, AND WHICH
INSTANTLY BECOMES A FLARE OF
GREEN FIRE WHICH LIGHTS
THE ENCLOSURE.

--FROM WHICH
GLIMMERING
EYES GIVES
BACK HIS
STARE WITH A
BURNING
INTENSITY.

THE FLAME DIES OUT, BUT THE
GLOW REMAINS-- A QUIVERING
BALL OF LAMBERT GREEN
THAT PULSES AT KHEMSA'S FEET.

-- THEN TURNS INTO A
LUMINOUS GREEN SMOKE
WHICH SPIRALS UPWARD
TOWARD THE IMPRISONED
MEN.

THE FEARFUL GAZE OF
THE TRIBESMEN IS
UPON IT AS IT WAVERS
--ELONGATES--

BEARDED LIPS PART,
BUT NO SOUND COMES
FORTH, AS A GREEN
CLOUD ROLLS THRU
THE BARS--

FROM THE ENVELOPING, FOOLIKE FOLDS COME
A SERIES OF STRAGGLED SOBS--



-- LIKE THE GASPS
OF MEN PLUNGED
SUDDENLY UNDER
THE SURFACE OF
WATER.

THAT IS
ALL.



WHEN THE MIST'S THINS, THE
GIRL GLIMPSES THE INDISTINCT
OUTLINE OF SEVEN STILL,
PROSTRATE SHAPES.

AND NOW,
MY LOVE, FOR
A STEED
SWIFTER THAN
ANY EVER
BRED IN A
MORTAL
STABLE.



WE'LL BE IN
AFGHANISTAN
BEFORE DAWN--

-- AND THE GATE
TO HELL LIES
WAITING FOR ANY
WHO STAND IN
OUR WAY.



REAVERS OF THE HILLS

IN DAYS TO COME, YASMINA WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO CLEARLY REMEMBER THE DETAILS OF HER MAD ABDUCTION.

BY THE TIME SHE REGAINS HER WITS, THE BARBARIAN'S FIERCE BHALKHANA STALLION IS SWEEPING UP THE SLOPES BEYOND PESHKHAURI.



AND SHE--THE DEVI OF VENDHYA, CONSIDERED LITTLE SHORT OF DIVINE BY GOLDEN KINGDOMS SOUTH OF THE HIMALAYS--IS LIKE A HELPLESS CHILD IN CONAN'S IRON THREWS.

AT LAST, SHE FINDS HER VOICE:

YOU HILL-BRED DOG!
YOU'LL PAY WITH YOUR
LIFE FOR THIS!

WHERE ARE
YOU TAKING
ME?

TO THE
VILLAGES OF
AFGHULISTAN
WHERE ELSE?



THEY WILL SEND AN ARMY TO HANG
YOU AND YOUR SPAWN OF DEVILS!

HAH! THE
GOVERNOR'S
ALREADY SENT
HIS RIDERS
AFTER US.

BUT, BY
CROW,
WE'LL LEAD
THEM A
MERRY
CHASE!



WHAT DO
YOU THINK,
DEVI?

WILL THEY PAY
SEVEN AFGHULI
LIVES FOR A
KSHATRIYA
PRINCESS?



GROWING SILENT
NOW, HE SHIFTS
HER TO A MORE
COMFORTABLE
POSITION IN
HIS ARMS, HER
EFFORTS TO
STRUGGLE ONLY
AMUSING HIM.

BESIDES, HER LIGHT SILKEN GARMENTS
ARE BEING OUTRAGEOUSLY DISARRANGED
BY HER SQUIRMINGS.

AT LENGTH, SHE
CONCLUDES THAT
A SCORNFUL SUB-
MISSION IS THE
BETTER PART OF
DIGNITY...



...AND SHE LAPSES
INTO A SMOLDERING
QUIESCENCE.



SOON, EVEN
HER ANGER
IS SUBMERGED
BY AWE AS
THEY ENTER
THE MOUTH
OF THE
ZHAIBAR
PASS...

...WHICH LOWERS
LIKE A BLACK
WELL-MOUTH
IN THE SLACKER
WALLS WHICH
RISE LIKE
COLOSSAL
RAMPARTS
TO BAR THEIR
WAY.

IT IS AS IF A GIGANTIC
KNIFE HAD CUT THE
PASS OUT OF SOLID
ROCK.



THE PATH IS DARK
AS HATE--YET
CONAN AND HIS
MOUNT KNOW
THE ROAD, EVEN
BY NIGHT.

BUT THEN, EVEN
AS THEY SWEEP
OUT INTO A GORGE
AT THE OTHER
END OF THE PASS...



...A JAVELIN
SWISHES THRU THE
AIR TO STRIKE
THAT GREAT
STALLION!

CROW'S
DEVILS!

OH-HH..!

WHEEE

EVEN AS THE HORSE FALLS, CONAN LEAPS CLEAR,
THE GIRL IN HIS ARMS--



--TO LIGHT ON HIS
FEET LIKE A CAT!



STAY THERE IN
THAT CLEFT
OF ROCK, IF
YOU VALUE
YOUR ROYAL
HIDE!

B-BUT
WHERE--?

JUST
STAY
PUT, DAMN
YOU!



HA-TOO!



YASMINA SCARCELY
EVEN SEES THE
MAN LEAPING.
BEFORE CONAN'S
MASSIVE ARM
COMES UP TO
BLOCK HIM WITH
A SICKENING
CRUNCH OF
JAWBONE.



THEN, THERE
IS A GLINT OF
STEEL, RISING
AND DESCEND-
ING WITH
HORRIBLE,
HAMMERLIKE
SWIFTNES--



--AND A
MOMENT'S
STILLNESS.
UNTIL--

WHAT YOU
DOGS & DO
YOU FLINCH--?



IN, CURSE
YOU, AND
TAKE
THEM!!



YAR
AFZAL!

IS IT
YOU?!



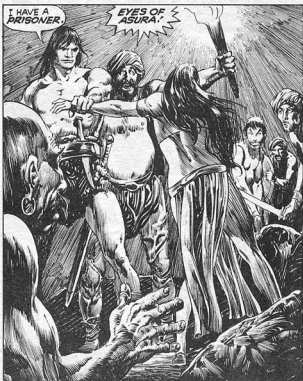
IS THAT YOU, CIMMERIAN?

AYE!
COME
FORTH,
YOU OLD
WAR DOG.

IT WOULD
SEEM I'VE
SLAIN
ONE OF
YOUR MEN.

SUDDENLY THERE
IS MOVEMENT
AMONG THE
ROCKS --

--WILD, RASPED MEN WITH EYES LIKE WOLVES
AND FIERCE WEAPONS IN THEIR FISTS.



SO, I'D SUGGEST
WE GET THE HELL
OUT OF HERE!

EVEN AS THE HILL-
REEVERS COMPLY,
CONAN FEELS THE
GIRL SHIVER IN
THE WIND THAT
MOANS DOWN THE
DEFILES...



THEN, ON THE MOUNT
OF THE MAN CONAN
KILLED--



...THE KIND OF CHILL
EVEN A RAGGED CLOAK
CAN CURE.



MAKE NO SOUND,
DEVI--ON YOUR
LIFE!

SHE IS FAR TOO
FRIGHTENED
TO THINK OF
DISOBEYING.



THEY RIDE OFF AS
WISPY AS PHANTOMS,
SAVE FOR THE CLUCK
OF THEIR HORSES'
HOOFES.



YASMINA, SNUGGLED WARMLY IN
HER CAPTOR'S ARMS, GROWS
DROWSY IN SILENCE OF HERSELF...

AND SOON, THE
CLINK OF HOOFES
AND THE CREAK
OF SADDLES
ARE LIKE THE
IRRELEVANT
SOUNDS OF A
DREAM.



AND IN THAT DREAM, AFTER SHE FEELS HERSELF LAID DOWN ON
SOMETHING SOFT AND RUSTLING, SHE HEARS YAR AFZAL LAUGH:

"A RARE PRIZE, CONAN--
FIT FOR A CHIEF OF
THE AFGHULIS!"

CONAN'S ANSWERING
RUMBLE COMES BACK:
"NOT FOR ME. THIS
WENCH WILL BUY
THE LIVES OF MY
SEVEN HEADMEN.
BLAST THEIR SOULS!"



BUT WHETHER SHE DREAMS
THIS PART OR NOT, SHE CANNOT
LATER SAY.


NEXT: THE MOUNTAIN OF THE BLACK SEERS!

The Hyborian Age

Adapted from the Essay by ROBERT E. HOWARD

CHAPTER 5 • FIRE AND SLAUGHTER

CIRCA 9,500 B.C.



ARUS, priest of MICRA, HAD INSTILLED IN GORM, THE PICTISH CHIEF, A DESIRE TO SEE THE CIVILIZED LANDS.

AT GORM'S REQUEST, ARUS CONDUCTED HIM AND SOME OF HIS WARRIORS THROUGH THE BOSSONIAN MARCHES, WHERE THE HONEST VILLAGERS STARED IN AMAZEMENT, AND INTO THE GLITTERING OUTER WORLD.

SOON, PICTS CAME AND WENT FREELY INTO ALL AQUILONIA.

ARUS NO DOUBT THOUGHT HE WAS MAKING CONVERTS FOR MICRA RIGHT AND LEFT, BECAUSE THE PICTS LISTENED TO HIM AND REPAINED FROM SMITING HIM WITH THEIR COPPER AXES.

BUT WHAT THEY REALLY WISHED TO LEARN FROM HIM--AND DID--WAS HOW TO MINE THE VAST IRON DEPOSITS IN THEIR HILLS, AND WORK THEM INTO WEAPONS.

WITH THESE, GORM BEGAN TO ASSERT HIS DOMINANCE OVER THE OTHER PICTISH CLANS.

AQUILONIA, meanwhile, pursuing her **WARS OF AGGRESSION** to the south and east, paid little heed to the vaguely-known lands of the west, from which more and more stocky pictish warriors swarmed to take service in her **MERCENARY ARMIES**.



THESE WARRIORS, THEIR SERVICE COMPLETED, WENT **BACK** TO THEIR WILDERNESS WITH GOOD IDEAS OF CIVILIZED WARFARE--

--AND THAT CONCEPT FOR CIVILIZATION WHICH ARISES FROM FAMILIARITY WITH IT.

AS FOR GORM, HE BECAME **CHIEF OF CHIEFS**--THE NEAREST APPROACH TO A **KING** THE PICTS HAD HAD IN THOUSANDS OF YEARS.



HE HAD WAITED LONG; HE WAS WELL PAST MIDDLE AGE.

BUT NOW HE MOVED AGAINST THE FRONTIERS, NOT IN TRADE, BUT IN WAR.

TOO LATE, ARUS SAW HIS MISTAKE; HE HAD TOUCHED ONLY THE PAGAN'S GREED, NOT HIS SOUL.



AND, MAKING A LAST EFFORT TO UNDO HIS UNWITTING WORK, HE WAS BRAINED BY A DRUNKEN PICT.

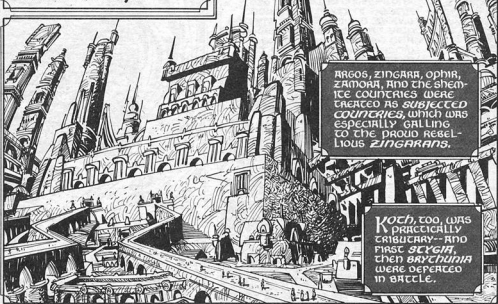
GORM WAS NOT WITH-
OUT GRATITUDE; HE CAUSED THE SKULL OF THE SLAYER TO BE SET ON TOP OF THE PRIEST'S CAIRN.



The pict's *BURST* upon the Bossonian frontiers-- clad not in tiger-skins but in *SCALE-MAIL*, wielding weapons of keen *STEEL*.

Still, for years, the *STUROY* Bossonians held the invaders at *bay*, thus keeping them from attacking *Aquilonia* itself.

Meanwhile, the *Aquilonian Empire* waxed strong, with *ARROGANCE* leading them to treat less powerful peoples, even the long-patchful *Bossonians*, with growing *contempt*.



ARGOS, *ZINGARA*, *Ophir*, *ZAMORA*, and the *shem-ice* countries were treated as *SUBJECTED COUNTRIES*, which was especially galling to the proud rebellious *ZINGARANS*.

Koch, too, was *practically* tributary-- and first *SCYTHIA*, then *BRYCHNIA* were defeated in battle.

Yet, powerful *NEMEDIA* directly to the west had never been subdued.



thus, the *Aquilonian* armies moved at last against their neighbor *STATE*.

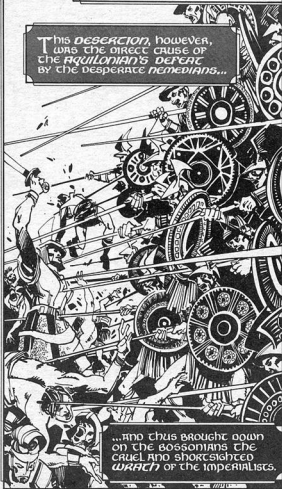
Their glittering ranks however, were largely filled by *MERCENARIES*, especially the *Bossonians*.

BECAUSE OF THE EASTERN WAR, SCARCELY ENOUGH MEN WERE LEFT IN THE BOSSONIAN MARCHES TO GUARD THE FRONTIER.



AND, HEARING OF *PICTISH OUTRAGES* IN THEIR HOMELANDS, WHOLE BOSSONIAN REGIMENTS QUIT THE NEMEDIAN CAMPAIGN AND MARCHED WESTWARD, WHERE THEY DEFEATED THE PICTS IN A GREAT BATTLE.

THIS *DESERCTION*, HOWEVER, WAS THE DIRECT CAUSE OF THE AQUILONIAN'S DEFEAT BY THE DESPERATE NEMEDIANS...



...AND THUS BROUGHT DOWN ON THE BOSSONIANS THE CRUEL AND SHORTSIGHTED WRATH OF THE IMPERIALISTS.

AQUILONIAN REGIMENTS WERE BROUGHT TO THE BORDERS OF THE MARCHES, AND THE BOSSONIAN CHIEFS WERE LURED INTO THEIR ENCAMPMENT.



THERE, THE UNARMED CHIEFS WERE MASSACRED, AND THE ARMORED IMPERIAL HOSTS THEN ATTACKED THE UNSUSPECTING PEOPLE.

FROM NORTH TO SOUTH, THE MARCHES WERE RAVAGED, AND THE AQUILONIAN ARMIES MARCHED BACK FROM THE BORDERS, LEAVING A RUINED AND DEVASTATED LAND BEHIND THEM.



And then, the *piccish invasion* burst in full power along those borders, led by *GORM*--an old man now, but with the fire of his *FIERCE AMBITION* undimmed.



This time there were no sturdy *BOSSONIAN* warriors in their path...



...so that the blood-mad *BARBARIANS* swarmed into *AQUILONIA* itself, before her *LEGIONS* could return from the war in the east.

ZINGARA seized this opportunity to throw off the yoke, followed by *CORINCHIA* and the *SHIMITES*.

whole *REGIMENTS* of mercenaries and vassals *MURDERED* and marched back to their own countries, *LOOTING AND BURNING* as they went... while still the *PICTS* surged irresistibly *EASTWARD*.

In the midst of this chaos, the wild-born *CIMMERIANS* swept down from their northern hills, completing the ruin...



And the Aquilonian
Empire went down
in fire and blood!



Next: the darkness...and the dawn

WORMS OF THE EARTH

THE SCENE IS A COMMON ENOUGH ONE. INTERPRET STRETCH THE FAR-FLUNG BOUNDARIES OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE:

A RUDE CROSS LIES FLAT UPON COLD STONE, AND ON IT IS BOUND A MAN—NEARLY NAKED, WILD OF ASPECT WITH HIS LOOSED LIMBS, GLARING EYES, AND SHOCK OF TWISTED HAIR...

STRIKE
IN THE
NAILS,
SOLDIERS!

...AND LET OUR
GUEST SEE THE
REALITY OF OUR
GOOD ROMAN
JUSTICE!

WRAPPING HIS PURPLE CLOAK CLOSER ABOUT HIS POWERFUL FRAME THERE IN THE COOL NIGHT AIR, TITUS SULLA ALLOWS A WICKING SMILE TO CURVE HIS FULL LIPS.

THEN HE PREPARES TO SETTLE BACK IN HIS OFFICIAL CHAIR, MUCH AS HE MIGHT HAVE DONE IN HIS SEAT AT THE CIRCUS MAXIMUS, TO ENJOY THE CLASH OF GLADIATORIAL SWORDS.

BEHIND HIM, IMPASSIVE BLOND TITANS FROM THE RHINELAND STAND WITH SHIELDS AND SPEARS...



THE MAN TO WHOM TITUS SULLA HAS REFERRED AS "GUEST" STANDS LIKE A DARK BRONZE IMAGE, UNSPEAKING...

WELL, PARTHA MAC OTHNA, WHEN YOU RETURN TO YOUR TRIBE--

--YOU WILL HAVE A TALE TO TELL OF THE JUSTICE OF ROME, WHO RULES HERE IN EBORACUM.



I WILL HAVE A TALE.



THE PAX ROMANA--REWARD FOR VIRTUE, PUNISHMENT FOR WRONG!

YOU SEE, EMISSARY OF PICTLAND, HOW SWIFTLY ROMAN PUNISHES THE TRANSGRESSOR

I SEE, TITUS SULLA...



...THAT THE SUBJECT OF A FOREIGN KING IS DEALT WITH AS THOUGH HE WERE BUT A ROMAN SLAVE!



HE HAS BEEN TRIED AND CONDEMNED IN AN UN-BIASED COURT...

AYE! AND THE ACCUSER WAS ROMAN, THE WITNESSES ROMAN, THE JUDGE ROMAN!

ALL THIS, BECAUSE IN A MOMENT OF FURY, HE STRUCK DOWN A ROMAN MERCHANT WHO HAD FIRST CHEATED, THEN SLAPPED HIM!



IS HIS OWN KING TOO WEAK OR FOOLISH TO DO JUSTICE, WERE HE INFORMED AND FORMAL CHARGES BROUGHT AGAINST THE OFFENDER?

YOU MAY INFORM YOUR KING, WHOM YOU CALL BRAN MAK MORN, THAT ROME MAKES NO ACCOUNT OF HER ACTIONS TO BARBARIAN KINGS.



WHEN SAVAGES COME AMONG US, LET THEM ACT WITH DISCRETION OR SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES.

NOW... THE MEN AWAIT MY SIGNAL...

YOU MAY
PROCEED.



**INEXORABLE
HAMMER-STROKES
DRIVE THE CRUEL
POINTS DEEP
THRU WRISTS
AND ANKLES.**

**BLOOD FLOWS IN A BLACK RIVER,
STAINING THE WOOD OF THE CROSS--
AND THE SPLINTERING OF BONES
IS DISTINCTLY HEARD.**

**YET, THOUGH THE BOUND
VICTIM INSTINCTIVELY
WRENCHES AND
STRUGGLES, HE
MAKES NO OUTCRY.**

**AT LENGTH, THE
FINAL STROKE
FALLS.**

**NOR DO THE SOLDIERS
NOTE THAT IN HIS BLACK,
UNGLAZED EYES...**

**...THERE STILL LINGERS A
DESPERATE SHADOW OF
HOPE...**

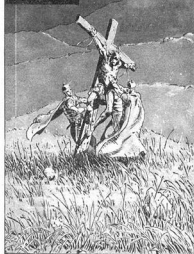
**...AS HE STARES AT THE
FACE OF THE MAN CALLED
PARTHA MAC OTHNA.**



**THE CORDS ARE
CUT, SO THAT THE
MAN WILL HANG
SUPPORTED BY THE
NAILS ALONE.**



THE PICT'S EYES ARE *STILL* ON THE SOMBER FACE OF THE EMISSARY AS THE SOLDIERS LIFT THE CROSS INTO PLACE...



BUT NOW, THE SHADOW OF HOPE IS *FADING*.



THESE PICTS ARE HARDER THAN *CATS* TO KILL!

I'LL KEEP A *GUARD* WATCHING DAY AND NIGHT, TO SEE THAT NO ONE TAKES HIM *DOWN* BEFORE HE *DIES*.

HERE, VALERIUS...



IN HONOR OF OUR ESTEEMED NEIGHBOR, KING BRAN MAK MORN...

... GIVE THE MAN A CUP OF WINE!



...TO AVOID EVEN *TOUCHING* THE PROFFERED CUP...

AS THE LAUGHING YOUNG OFFICER COMES FORWARD, THE DYING PICT WRITHES HIS HEAD ASIDE...



...AND SPITS FULL INTO THE ROMAN'S EYES!

WH--?



PICTISH DOG!







GHOST in the NIGHT

LATER, IN AN INNER CHAMBER OF EBORACUM, THE MAN CALLED PARTHA MAC OTHNA PACES TIGERISHLY TO AND FRO, HIS SANDALED FEET MAKING NO SOUND ON THE MARBLE TILES.

HIS UNSPEAKING SERVANT WATCHES HIM, ALMOST STARTING AT LENGTH SUDDENLY TO HEAR HIS OWN NAME:

GROM-- WELL I KNOW WHY YOU HELD MY KNEES SO TIGHTLY-- WHY YOU MUTTERED AID OF THE MOON-WOMAN!

YOU FEARED I WOULD LOSE MY SELF-CONTROL AND MAKE A MAD ATTEMPT TO SUCCOR THE POOR WRETCH.

I BELIEVE THAT WAS WHAT THE ROMAN DOG WISHED, WITH ALL HIS BAITING.

BY THE GODS! THAT I SHOULD STAND BY AND SEE A MAN OF MINE SLAUGHTERED ON A ROMAN CROSS!

BLACK GODS OF R'LYEH-- EVEN YOU WOULD I INVOKE TO THE RUIN AND DESTRUCTION OF THOSE BUTCHERS!

I SWEAR BY THE NAMELESS ONES, MEN SHALL DIE HOWLING FOR THAT DEED--

--AND ROME SHALL CRY OUT AS A WOMAN IN THE DARK WHO TREADS UPON AN ADDER!



HE **KNEW** YOU, MASTER.

HIS **EYES** WILL HAUNT ME WHEN I LIE **DYING!**

AYE, HE **KNEW** ME--AND ALMOST UNTIL THE **LAST**, I READ IN HIS EYES THE HOPE THAT I MIGHT **AID** HIM.



GODS AND DEVILS! IS ROME TO BUTCHER MY PEOPLE BENEATH MY VERY **EYES?**

THEN I AM NOT **KING**, BUT **DOG!**

NOT SO **LOUD**, MASTER! IF THESE ROMANS SUSPECTED YOU WERE **BRAIN** MAK MORN--

--THEY'D NAIL YOU ON A CROSS BESIDE THAT **OTHER!**

THEY WILL KNOW IT, AND **SOON!**



TOO LONG HAVE I LINGERED HERE IN THE GUISE OF AN **EMISSARY**, SPYING UP-ON MY ENEMIES.

BY THE **GODS**-- I'LL RIDE FORTH AND **ANSWER** THESE ROMAN GIBES WITH **BLACK SHAFT** AND TRENCANT **STEEL!**



AND THIS CHIEF WITH THE **PLUMAGE**-- THIS **TITUS SULLA**--

--HE **DIES?**

EASIER SAID THAN **DONE**, GROM.

HE **DIES**...



BUT HOW MAY I **REACH** HIM, WITH **GERMAN GUARDS** AT HIS WINDOWS DAY AND NIGHT?

LET ME TRY, MASTER! MY LIFE MEANS **NOTHING**.

I WILL CUT HIM DOWN IN THE **MIDST** OF HIS WARRIORS! I--



NAY, OLD WAR-DOG, YOU'LL NOT THROW YOUR LIFE AWAY **NEEDLESSLY**.

I **KNOW** THIS **TITUS SULLA**. HE IS **NO FOOL**...

...NOR A **COWARD**, THOUGH EVEN THE **BRAVEST** MAN HAS HIS OWN **PARTICULAR FEAR**.



THUS, DURING A **WAR** UPON THE **WALL OF HADRIAN**, **TITUS SULLA** DOES NOT HASTEN THERE, AS THE MILITARY GOVERNOR OF THIS PROVINCE **SHOULD DO**--

-- BUT SENDS **CAIUS CAMILLIUS** IN HIS PLACE--

-- WHILE HE HIMSELF TAKES UP RESIDENCE FAR TO THE **WEST**, IN THE **TOWER OF TRAJAN!**

IT IS **THERE**, IN HIS VERY **DEN**, THAT THE ROMAN LION MUST BE **BEARDED**.



GROM, RIDE NORTH TO **CORNAC NA CONNACHT!**

TELL HIM TO **SWEEP** THE FRONTIER WITH **SWORD AND TORCH**; LET HIS WILD **GAELS** FEAST THEIR FILL WITH **SLAUGHTER!**

AND YOU, MASTER?

AFTER A WHILE, I WILL BE WITH HIM.



BUT, FOR A **TIME**... I HAVE AFFAIRS IN THE **WEST**.

MY **BRONZE SEAL** IS MY SAFE-CONDUCT TO ROMAN COURTS; IT WILL OPEN ALL GATES BETWEEN THIS HOUSE AND **BAAL-DOR**.

AND, WHEN ALL OTHER KEYS FAILS-- TRY THIS **GOLDEN ONE!**

GO NOW!

THERE IS NO CEREMONIOUS **LEAVE-TAKING** BETWEEN THE BARBARIAN KING AND HIS EQUALLY BARBARIAN **VASSAL**.

ONE MOMENT, GORM IS **THERE**; THE NEXT, HE IS **GONE**.

I'LL WAIT TILL THE **MOON** SETS. THEN, I'LL TAKE TO THE ROAD.

BUT BEFORE I GO, I'VE A **DEBT** TO PAY.

STILL, A BIT OF **SLEEP...**

THOUGH HE **SEETHES** WITH HATE AND BLACK PASSION FOR VENGEANCE, **BRAN** MAK MORN FALLS INSTANTLY **ASLEEP**, AS DOES A WOLF ON THE HUNTING TRAIL.

HE SINKS INTO FLEECY GRAY FATHOMS OF SLUMBER--

AND, IN A TIMELESS, MISTY REALM, HE MEETS THE TALL, LEAN, WHITE-BEARDED FIGURE OF OLD **GONAR**-- PRIEST OF THE **MOON**, HIGH COUNSELLOR TO THE KING OF THE **PICTS**.

BRAN STANDS AGNAST-- FOR, IN ALL THE YEARS OF HIS LIFE, HE HAS **NEVER BEFORE** SEEN **GONAR** THE WISE SHOW SIGNS OF-- **FEAR!**

WHAT **NOW**, OLD ONE? GOES ALL WELL IN **BAAL-DOR**?

ALL IS WELL WHERE MY **BODY** LIES SLEEPING, MY KING.

YET, ACROSS THE **VOID** I HAVE COME TO **BATTLE** WITH YOU FOR YOUR **SOUL**.

ARE YOU **MAD**?

THIS **THOUGHT** YOU HAVE IN YOUR **BRAIN**--!

GONAR, THIS DAY I
STOOD BY AND
WATCHED A PICT
DIE ON THE
CROSS OF ROME.

WHAT HIS NAME OR
HIS RANK, I DO NOT
KNOW. I DO NOT
CARE.

IT WAS
MINE TO
PROTECT HIM--
AND I FAILED.

NOW, IT IS
MINE TO
AVENGE
HIM!

ALL THAT I
WILL DO!
BUT NOW--
NOW--!

HAH! WHAT DO ROMANS
KNOW OF THE MYSTERIES
OF THIS ANCIENT ISLE,
WHICH SHELTERED STRANGE
LIFE LONG BEFORE THEIR
CITY ROSE FROM THE
MARSHES OF THE TIBER?

BUT, IN THE NAME OF
THE GODS, BRAN--TAKE
YOUR VENGEANCE
ANOTHER WAY THAN
THAT OF WHICH YOU
ARE THINKING!

RETURN TO THE
HEATHER--MASS
YOUR WARRIORS,
AND SPREAD A SEA
OF BLOOD AND FLAME
THE LENGTH OF THE
GREAT WALL--!

BRAN, THERE
ARE WEAPONS
TOO FOUL TO
USE, EVEN
AGAINST ROME.

THERE ARE NO
WEAPONS I WOULD
NOT USE AGAINST
ROME!

BY STEEL AND
FIRE I WILL FIGHT
HER--BY SUBTLETY
AND BY
TREACHERY--

--AYE, AND BY
THE WORMS
OF THE
EARTH!

THEN WOE, BRAN--
WOE TO PICTDOM,
IF YOU REACH THE
BEINGS YOU SEEK!

WOE TO
THE UNBORN
KINGDOM!

AND WOE,
BLACK WOE
TO ALL THE
SONS OF MEN!

BRAN AWAKES TO A SHADOWED
ROOM AND THE STARLIGHT ON THE
WINDOW-BARS THE MOON HAS SUNK
FROM SIGHT...

MEMORIES OF HIS DREAM-- SO UNREAL, YET SO VERY REAL-- SHAKE BRAN, AND HE SWEARS BENEATH HIS BREATH:



NO ROMAN SERVANTS ARE THERE TO SEE HIM RISE; HE HAS REFUSED SUCH AS WERE OFFERED, LEST THEY SPY ON HIM.



GNAILED GROM ATTENDS TO ALL BRAN'S SIMPLE NEEDS.



NOW, HE DONS A SHIRT OF BLACK MESH-MAIL...

...A SWORD...

...A DIRK...



...AND, GOING TO AN IRON-BOUND CHEST, HE LIFTS SEVERAL COMPACT BAGS...



...EMPTYING THE CLINKING CONTENTS INTO THE LEATHERN POUCH AT HIS SIDE.

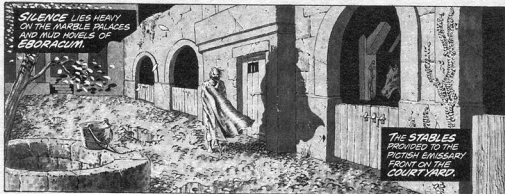
THEN, HIS CLOAK WRAPPED ABOUT HIM, AND HIS FEET PADDING NOISELESSLY ON THE COLD FLOOR...



...HE STRIDES BY THE MARBLE FRIEZEWORK AND FLUTED COLUMNS...



...AND SO PARTHA MAC OTHIA PASSES FROM THE MEMORY OF MAN.



**SILENCE LIES HEAVY
ON THE MARBLE PALACES
AND MUD HOLELS OF
EBORACUM.**

**THE STABLES
PROVIDED TO THE
PICTISH EMISSARY
FRONT ON THE
COURTYARD.**



**GROPING IN THE DARK, HE FINDS
HIS OWN GREAT STALLION...**



**...BRIDLING AND
SADDLING HIM
WITHOUT A LIGHT...**



**...THEN LEADING
HIM INTO A SHADY
SIDE-STREET...**



**...FROM WHICH
CAN BE SEEN
LOOMING THE
GREAT WATCH
TOWER
WHICH CONNECTS
WITH AND REARS
ABOVE THE
OUTER WALL.**



**ONE CORNER
OF THAT CASTLE-
LIKE FORTRESS,
BRAN KNOWS,
SERVES AS A
DUNGEON...**



**...WHERE THE YOUNG
OFFICER VALERIUS
LIES TOSSING IN
UNEASY, FITFUL
SLUMBER.**



**TOWARD IT, BRAN STEALS LIKE
A PROWLING PANTHER.**

"DAMN THAT
INSOLENT PICT!"
SNARLS VALERIUS,
WAKING. "IF NOT
FOR HIM, I'D BE
WITH A **WOMAN**
TONIGHT, INSTEAD
OF HERE!

"STILL, **TITUS SULLA**
WILL NOT BE TOO **HARSH**
ON A MAN WITH MY
HIGH CONNECTIONS.
HE--

"WAIT!" HE
THINKS. "WHAT
OF THE **SOUND**
THAT ROUSED
ME?"

HSSST!

WHAT--?

WHO'S
THERE?

I SAID,
WHO THE
DEVIL'S--?

VALERIUS' ONLY
ANSWER IS A
SNARL OF WOLFISH
LAUGHTER--

--A LONG FLICKER
OF **STEEL** THERE
IN THE STARLIGHT--

AGGGGG

--AND A PAINFUL,
BLOOD-GURGLING
DEATH.



ONLY A SINGLE
GUARDSMAN AT
THE WESTERN GATE!
SO MUCH THE
BETTER.



HALT, FELLOW--AND GIVE
AN ACCOUNT OF YOURSELF!

YOU'RE **NO**
ROMAN, BY
THE LOOK OF
YOU, SO--

I BRING YOU
GIFTS, DOG
OF ROME...



...A GIFT
IN **EITHER**
HAND...



...AND YOU
CHOOSE THE ONE
YOU **GET**!



A GOLDEN BRIBE--
OR A BATTLE TO THE
DEATH WITH THIS
UNKNOWN, OBVIOUSLY
BARBARIAN RIDER...



THE CHOICE--FOR THIS
MAN, AT LEAST--IS NOT
A DIFFICULT ONE.



HERE, DOG--



AND, IF ANY
ASK WHERE
YOU **GOT**
THEM--



--TELL THEM,
FROM A **GHOST**
IN THE NIGHT--



--AS HE RODE
FORTH INTO
HELL!