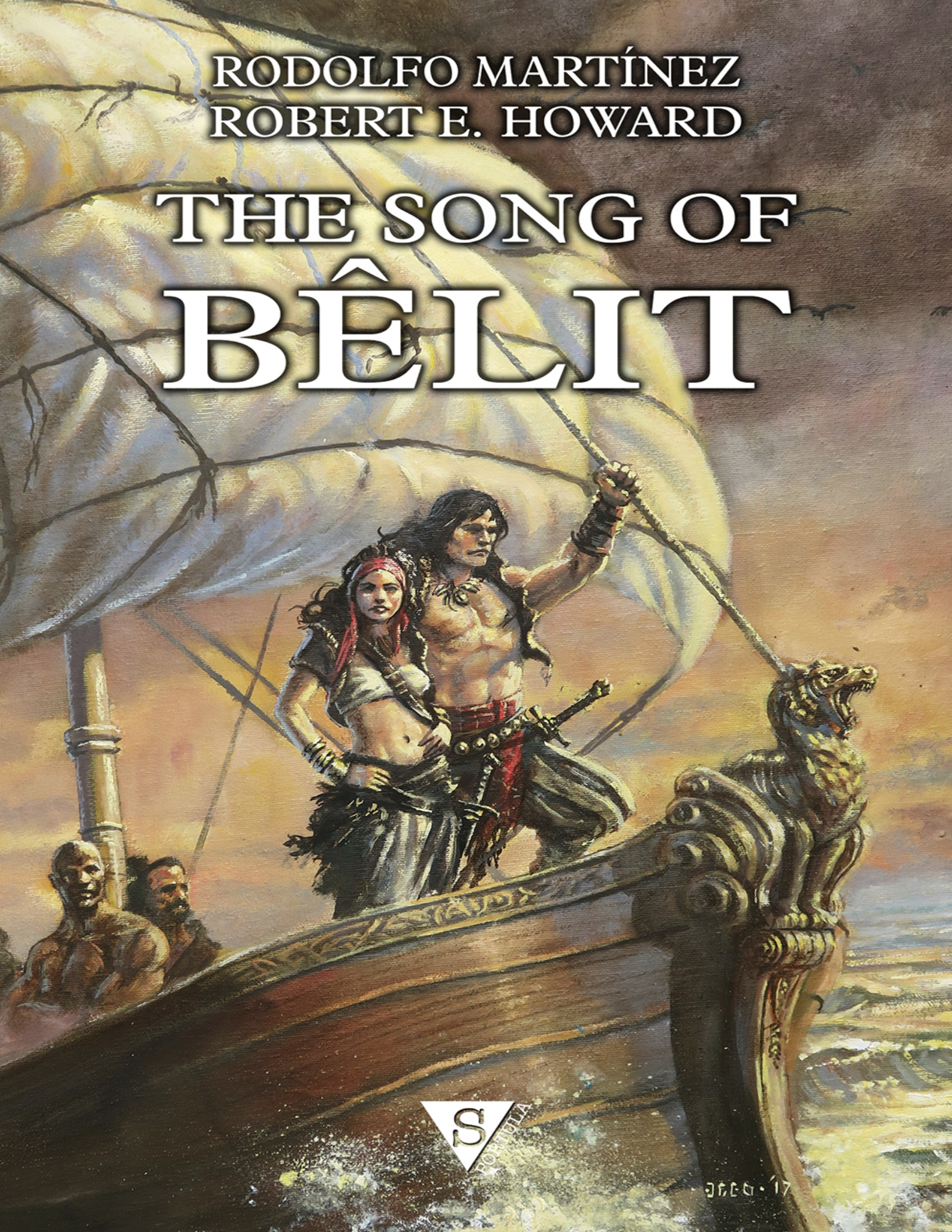


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THE SONG OF BÊLIT



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BÊLIT

A CONAN NOVEL



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Know, oh prince, that between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis and the gleaming cities, and the years of the rise of the Sons of Aryas, there was an Age undreamed of, when shining kingdoms lay spread across the world like blue mantles beneath the stars—Nemedia, Ophir, Brythunia, Hyperborea, Zamora with its dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery, Zingara with its chivalry, Koth that bordered on the pastoral lands of Shem, Stygia with its shadow-guarded tombs, Hyrkania whose riders wore steel and silk and gold. But the proudest kingdom of the world was Aquilonia, reigning supreme in the dreaming west. Hither came Conan, the Cimmerian, black-haired, sullen eyed, sword in hand, a thief, a reaver, a slayer, with gigantic melancholies and gigantic mirth, to tread the jeweled thrones of the Earth under his sandalled feet.

THE NEMEDIAN CHRONICLES

PROLOGUE

THE PROPHECY

*Believe green buds awaken in the spring,
That autumn paints the leaves with somber fire;
Believe I held my heart inviolate
To lavish on one man my hot desire.*

The song of Bêlit

N'Yaga, flanked by two priests of Isis and Osiris, stood on top of N'Ketil, the highest peak of Nakanda. The stars gazed at him from above as he knelt down and placed his palm on the ground.

The priests stood aside, uneasy as they always felt when any of the ancient rituals were performed. N'Yaga dipped his fingers in the ground, closed his eyes and waited while a hoarse murmur escaped from his throat.

He did not have to wait long. The presence of the Parents made the earth tremble and he felt a tingling sensation at his fingertips.

Here we are, child, you have called us, he felt in his mind. It was a deep, reverberating voice.

N'Yaga inhaled. He had examined the evidence, consulted the various signs. The answer had been, time and again, that the prophecy was about to be fulfilled. Really? Was everything they had been waiting for thousands of years going to happen?

Events are rushing, child, was the answer. *The future is sowing itself right now in the present.*

The old shaman held his breath. Would they succeed?

Khemi Asud and Khemi Ahmar again will be one. Seth will be expelled to the shadows. But the price will be high. For everyone. Especially for you.

How high?

So high that, if you knew, maybe you would desist. The Parents paused, as if giving N'Yaga time to make a decision. *You want to know?*

Did he? He had devoted his life to the fulfillment of the prophecy, as all the shamans before him. What could he do? What was better? Remain ignorant and let the future run its course or get too much information and risk twisting it?

Time passed around him. He felt the breath of the expectant Parents at the back of his head.

At last he made up his mind, hoping to have chosen wisely.

It is hard to say, child.

It did not matter. He had made a decision. He would pay the price, whichever it was, and he would then regret if that was the case. There was too much at stake not to do so.

The prophecy would come true. They would get back what was theirs.
They would succeed.

For a while, at least, said the Parents.

He frowned. For a while?

Nothing is forever, child, you should know. Nothing lasts forever.

They were right.

Be strong, child. You are going to need it.

He felt the presence of the Parents withdrawing from his head and returning to the ground, which again trembled slightly. He opened his eyes and stood up. The priests gazed at him expectantly.

“It will be soon,” he said, answering their silent question. “Very soon.”

PART ONE
THE TIGRESS
AND THE LION

1

THE SEA TIGRESS

Among the adventures surrounding the youth of the future king of Aquilonia, none is more colorful than his time as Corsair of the Black Coast. The one who was destined to become king of the hegemonic western nation spent much of his youth raiding and raping some of the kingdoms that would later become his neighbors, and even his allies.

The way in which Conan ended up becoming a corsair cannot be any more intriguing. He was actually fleeing from the justice of Messantia when, involuntarily, he ended up as an unwanted passenger of an Argosean merchant.

The Nemedian Chronicles

Hoofs drummed down the street that sloped to the wharfs. The folk that yelled and scattered had only a fleeting glimpse of a mailed figure on a black stallion, a wide scarlet cloak flowing out on the wind. From far up the street came the shout and clatter of pursuit, but the horseman did not look back. He swept out onto the wharfs and jerked the plunging stallion back on its haunches at the very lip of the pier. Seamen gaped up

at him, as they stood to the sweep and striped sail of a high-prowed, broadwaisted galley. The master, sturdy and black-bearded, stood in the bows, easing her away from the piles with a boat-hook. He yelled angrily as the horseman sprang from the saddle and with a long leap landed squarely on the mid-deck.

“Who invited you aboard?”

“Get under way!” roared the intruder with a fierce gesture that spattered red drops from his broadsword.

“But we’re bound for the coasts of Kush!” expostulated the master.

“Then I’m for Kush! Push off, I tell you!” The other cast a quick glance up the street, along which a squad of horsemen were galloping; far behind them toiled a group of archers, crossbows on their shoulders.

“Can you pay for your passage?” demanded the master.

“I pay my way with steel!” roared the man in armor, brandishing the great sword that glittered bluey in the sun. “By Crom, yin, if you don’t get under way, I’ll drench this galley in the ‘blood of its crew!’”

The shipmaster was a good judge of men. One glance at the irk scarred face of the swordsman, hardened with passion, and he shouted a quick order, thrusting strongly against the piles. The galley wallowed out into clear water, the oars began to clack rhythmically; then a puff of wind filled the shimmering sail, the light ship heeled to the gust, then took her course like a swan, gathering headway as she skimmed along.

On the wharfs the riders were shaking their swords and shouting threats and commands that the ship put about, and yelling for the bowmen to hasten before the craft was out of arbalest range.

“Let them rave,” grinned the swordsman hardily. “Keep her on her course, master steersman.”

The master descended from the small deck between the bows, made his way between the rows of oarsmen, and mounted the mid-deck. The stranger stood there with his back to the mast, eyes narrowed alertly, sword ready. The shipman eyed him steadily, careful not to make any move toward the long knife in his belt. He saw a tall, powerfully built figure in a black scalemail hauberk, burnished greaves and a blue-steel helmet from which jutted highly polished bull’s horns. From the mailed shoulders fell the scarlet cloak, blowing in the sea-wind. A broad shagreen belt with a golden buckle held the scabbard of the broadsword he bore. Under the horned helmet a square-cut black mane contrasted with smoldering blue eyes.

“If we must travel together,” said the master, “we may as well be at peace with each other. My name is Tito, licensed mastershipman of the ports of Argos. I am bound for Kush, to trade beads and silks and sugar and brass-hilted swords to the black kings for ivory, copra, copper ore, slaves and pearls.”

The swordsman glanced back at the rapidly receding docks, where the figures still gesticulated helplessly, evidently having trouble in finding a boat swift enough to overhaul the fast-sailing galley.

“I am Conan, a Cimmerian,” he answered. “I came into Argos seeking employment, but with no wars forward, there was nothing to which I might turn my hand.”

“Why do the guardsman pursue you?” asked Tito. “Not that it’s any of my business, but I thought perhaps—”

“I’ve nothing to conceal,” replied the Cimmerian. “By Crom, though I’ve spent considerable time among you civilized peoples, your ways are still beyond my comprehension.

“Well, last night in a tavern, a captain in the king’s guard offered violence to the sweetheart of a young soldier, who naturally ran him through. But it seems there is some cursed law against killing guardsmen, and the boy and his girl fled away. It was bruited about that I was seen with them, and so today I was haled into court, and a judge asked me where the lad had gone. I replied that since he was a friend of mine, I could not betray him. Then the court waxed wrath, and the judge talked a great deal about my duty to the state, and society, and other things I did not understand, and bade me tell where my friend had flown. By this time, I was becoming wrathful myself, for I had explained my position.

“But I choked my ire and held my peace, and the judge squalled that I had shown contempt for the court, and that I should be hurled into a dungeon to rot until I betrayed my friend. So then, seeing they were all mad, I drew my sword and cleft the judge’s skull; then I cut my way out of the court, and seeing the high constable’s stallion tied nearby, I rode for the wharfs, where I thought to find a ship bound for foreign parts.”

“Well,” said Tito hardily, “the courts have fleeced me too often in suits with rich merchants for me to owe them any love. I’ll have questions to answer if I ever anchor in that port again, but I can prove I acted under compulsion. You may as well put up your sword. We’re peaceable sailors,

and have nothing against you. Besides, it's as well to have a fighting-man like yourself on board. Come up to the poop-deck and we'll have a tankard of ale."

"Good enough," readily responded the Cimmerian, sheathing his sword.

The *Argus* was a small sturdy ship, typical of those trading-craft which ply between the ports of Zingara and Argos and the southern coasts, hugging the shoreline and seldom venturing far into the open ocean. It was high of stern, with a tall curving prow; broad in the waist, sloping beautifully to stem and stern. It was guided by the long sweep from the poop, and propulsion was furnished mainly by the broad striped silk sail, aided by a jibsail. The oars were for use during calms, and in tacking out of creeks and bays. There were ten to the side, five fore and five aft of the small mid-deck. The most precious part of the cargo was lashed under this deck, and under the fore-deck. The men slept on deck or between the rowers' benches, protected in bad weather by canopies. With twenty men at the oars, three at the sweep, and the shipmaster, the crew was complete.

So the *Argus* pushed steadily southward, with consistently fair weather. The sun beat down from day to day with fiercer heat, and the canopies were run up—striped silken cloths that matched the shimmering sail and the shining goldwork on the prow and along the gunwales.

They sighted the coast of Shem—long, rolling meadowlands with the white crowns of city towers in the distance, and horsemen with blue-black beards and hooked noses, who sat on their steeds along the shore and eyed the galley with suspicion. She did not put in; there was scant profit in trade with the sons of Shem.

Nor did master Tito pull into the broad bay where the Styx river emptied its gigantic flood into the ocean, and the massive black castles of Khemi loomed over the blue waters. Ships did not put unasked into this port, where dusky sorcerers wove awful spells in the murk of sacrificial smoke mounting eternally from blood-stained altars where naked women screamed, and where Seth, the Old Serpent, arch-demon of the Hyborians but god of the Stygians, was said to writhe his shining coils among his worshippers.

Master Tito gave that dreamy, glass-floored bay a wide berth, even when a serpent-prowed gondola shot from behind a castellated point of land, and naked dusky women, with great red blossoms in their hair, stood and posed and postured brazenly and called to his sailors.

Now no more shining towers rose inland. They had passed the southern borders of Stygia and were cruising along the coasts of Kush. The sea and the ways of the sea were neverending mysteries to Conan, whose homeland was among the high hills of the northern uplands. The wanderer was no less of interest to the sturdy seamen, few of whom had ever seen one of his race.

They were characteristic Argosean sailors: short and stockily built. Conan towered above them, and no two of them could match his

strength. They were hardy and robust, but his was the endurance and vitality of a wolf, his thews steeled and his nerves whetted by the hardness of his life in the world's wastelands. He was quick to laugh, quick and terrible in his wrath. He was a valiant trencherman, and strong drink was a passion and a weakness with him. Naive as a child in many ways, unfamiliar with the sophistry of civilization, he was naturally intelligent, jealous of his rights, and dangerous as a hungry tiger. Young in years, he was hardened in warfare and wandering, and his sojourns in many lands were evident in his apparel. His horned helmet was such as was worn by the golden-haired Aesir of Nordheim; his hauberk and greaves were of the finest workmanship of Koth; the fine ring-mail which sheathed his arms and legs was of Nemedias; the blade at his girdle was a great Aquilonian broadsword; and his gorgeous scarlet cloak could have been spun nowhere but in Ophir.

So they beat southward, and master Tito began to look for the high-walled villages of the black people. But they found only smoking ruins on the shore of a bay, littered with naked black bodies. Tito swore.

"I had good trade here, aforetime. This is the work of Stygians in search for slaves... Or of pirates."

"And if we meet them?" Conan loosened his great blade in its scabbard.

"Mine is no warship. We run, not fight. Yet if it came to a pinch, we have beaten off reavers before, and might do it again; unless it were Bêlit's *Tigress*."

"Who is Bêlit?"

“The wildest she-devil unchanged. Unless I read the signs wrong, it was her butchers who destroyed that village on the bay. May I someday see her dangling from the yard-arm! She is called the Queen of the Black Coast. She is a Shemite woman, who leads black raiders. They harry the shipping and have sent many a good tradesman to the bottom.”

From under the poop-deck Tito brought out quilted jerkins, steel caps, bows and arrows.

“Little use to resist if we’re run down,” he grunted. “But it rasps the soul to give up life without a struggle.”

It was just at sunrise when the lookout shouted a warning. Around the long point of an island off the starboard bow glided a long, lethal shape—a slender serpentine galley with a raised deck that ran from stem to stern. Forty oars on each side drove her swiftly through the water, and the low rail swarmed with naked blacks that chanted and clashed spears on oval shields. From the masthead floated a long, crimson pennon.

“Bêlit!” yelled Tito, paling. “Yare! Put her about! Into that creek-mouth! If we can beach her before they run us down, we have a chance to escape with our lives!”

So, veering sharply, the *Argus* ran for the line of surf that boomed along the palm-fringed shore. Tito strode back and forth, exhorting the panting rowers to greater efforts. The master’s black beard bristled, his eyes glared.

“Give me a bow,” requested Conan. “It’s not my idea of a manly weapon, but I learned archery among the Hyrkanians, and it will go hard if I can’t feather a man or so on yonder deck.”

Standing on the poop, he watched the serpent-like ship skimming lightly over the waters, and landsman though he was, it was evident to him that the *Argus* would never win that race. Already, arrows arching from the pirate’s deck were falling with a hiss into the sea, not twenty paces astern.

“We’d best stand to it,” growled the Cimmerian; “else we’ll all die with shafts in our backs, and not a blow dealt.”

“Bend to it, dogs!” roared Tito with a passionate gesture of his brawny fist. The bearded rowers grunted, heaved at the oars, while their muscles coiled and knotted, and sweat started out on their hides. The timbers of the stout little galley creaked and groaned as the men fairly ripped her through the water. The wind had fallen; the sail hung limp. Nearer crept the inexorable raiders, and they were still a good mile from the surf when one of the steersmen fell gagging across a sweep, a long arrow through his neck. Tito sprang to take his place, and Conan, bracing his feet wide on the heaving poop deck, lifted the bow Tito had given him. He had never seen one like that –long, almost as tall as the Cimmerian, thin, amazingly flexible. Though he had heard of the Aquilonian longbows, it was the first time he had held one of them in his hand and he could not help but to admire its stylishness and effectiveness. But time was short, so he drew the bow and stopped wondering how the captain had gotten such a weapon.

He could see the details of the pirate plainly now. The rowers were protected by a line of raised mantelets along the sides, but the warriors dancing on the narrow deck were in full view. These were painted and plumed, and mostly naked, brandishing spears and spotted shields.

On a raised platform in the bow stood a slim figure whose white skin glistened in dazzling contrast to the glossy ebon hides around it. Bêlit, without a doubt. Conan drew the shaft to his ear—then some whim or qualm stayed his hand and sent the arrow through the body of a tall, plumed spearman beside her.

Bit by bit, the pirate galley was overtaking the lighter ship. Arrows fell in a rain about the *Argus*, and men cried out. All the steersmen were down, pincushioned, and Tito was handling the massive sweep alone, gasping black curses, his braced legs knots of straining thews. Then with a sob he sank down, a long shaft quivering in his sturdy heart. The *Argus* lost headway and rolled in the swell. The men shouted in confusion, and Conan took command in characteristic fashion.

“Up, lads!” he roared, loosing with a vicious twang of cord. “Grab your steel and give these dogs a few knocks before they cut our throats! Useless to bend your backs anymore: they’ll board us ere we can row another fifty paces!”

In desperation, the sailors abandoned their oars and snatched up their weapons. It was valiant, but useless. They had time for one flight of arrows before the pirate ship was upon them. With no one at the sweep, the *Argus* rolled broadside, and the steel-baked prow of the raider crashed into her amidships. Grappling-irons crunched into the side.

From the lofty gunwales, the black pirates drove down a volley of shafts that tore through the quilted jackets of the doomed sailormen, then sprang down spear in hand to complete the slaughter. On the deck of the pirate lay half a dozen bodies, a testimony to Conan's archery.

The fight on the *Argus* was short and bloody. The stocky sailors, no match for the tall barbarians, were cut down to a man. Elsewhere, the battle had taken a peculiar turn. Conan, on the high-pitched poop, was on a level with the pirate's deck. As the steel prow slashed into the *Argus*, he braced himself and kept his feet under the shock, casting away his bow. A tall corsair, bounding over the rail, was met in midair by the Cimmerian's great sword, which sheared him cleanly through the torso, so that his body fell one way and his legs another. Then, with a burst of fury that left a heap of mangled corpses along the gunwales, Conan was over the rail and on the deck of the *Tigress*.

In an instant he was the center of a hurricane of stabbing spears and lashing clubs. But he moved in a blinding blur of steel. Spears bent on his armor or swished empty air, and his sword sang its death-song. The fighting-madness of his race was upon him, and with a red mist of unreasoning fury wavering before his blazing eyes, he cleft skulls, smashed breasts, severed limbs, ripped out entrails, and littered the deck with a ghastly harvest of brains and blood.

Invulnerable in his armor, his back against the mast, he heaped mangled corpses at his feet until his enemies gave back panting in rage and fear. Then, as they lifted their spears to cast them, and he tensed himself to leap and die in the midst of them, a shrill cry froze the lifted

arms. They stood like statues, the black giants poised for the spearcasts, the mailed swordsman with his dripping blade.

Bêlit sprang before the blacks, beating down their spears. She turned toward Conan, her bosom heaving, her eyes flashing. Fierce fingers of wonder caught at his heart. She was slender, yet formed like a goddess: at once lithe and voluptuous. Her only garment was a broad, silken girdle. Her white ivory limbs and the ivory globes of her breasts drove a beat of fierce passion through the Cimmerian's pulse, even in the panting fury of battle. Her rich hair, black as a Stygian night, fell in rippling burnished clusters down her supple back. Her dark eyes burned on the Cimmerian.

She was untamed as a desert wind, supple and dangerous as a she-panther. She came close to him, heedless of his great blade dripping with the blood of her warriors. Her supple thigh brushed against it, so close she came to the tall warrior. Her red lips parted as she stared up into his somber, menacing eyes.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "By Ishtar, I have never seen your like, though I have ranged the sea from the coasts of Zingara to the fires of the ultimate south. Whence come you?"

"From Argos," he answered shortly, alert for treachery. Should her slim hand move toward the jeweled dagger in her girdle, a buffet of his open hand would stretch her senseless on the deck. Yet in his heart he did not fear; he had held too many women, civilized or barbaric, in his iron-thewed arms, not to recognize the light that burned in the eyes of this one.

“You are no soft Hyborian!” she exclaimed. “You are fierce and hard as a gray wolf. Those eyes were never dimmed by city lights; those thews were never softened by life amid marble walls.”

“I am Conan, a Cimmerian,” he answered.

To the people of the exotic climes, the north was a hazy, half-mythical realm, peopled with ferocious blue-eyed giants who occasionally descended from their icy fastnesses with torch and sword. Their raids had never taken them as far south as Shem, and this daughter of Shem made no distinction between Aesir, Vanir or Cimmerian. With the unerring instinct of the elemental feminine, she knew she had found her lover, and his race meant naught, save as it invested him with the glamor of far lands.

“And I am Bêlit,” she cried, as one might say, “I am queen.”

“Look at me, Conan!” She threw wide her arms. “I am Bêlit, Queen of the Black Coast. Oh, tiger of the North, you are cold as the snowy mountains which bred you. Take me and crush me with your fierce love! Go with me to the ends of the earth and the ends of the sea! I am a queen by fire and steel and slaughter—be thou my king!”

His eyes swept the blood-stained ranks, seeking expressions of wrath or jealousy. He saw none. The fury was gone from the ebon faces. He realized that to these men, Bêlit was more than a woman; she was a goddess whose will was unquestioned. He glanced at the *Argus*, wallowing in the crimson sea-wash, heeling far over, her decks awash, held up by the grappling-irons. He glanced at the blue-fringed shore, at the far green hazes of the ocean, at the vibrant figure which stood before

him, and his barbaric soul stirred within him. To quest these shining blue realms with that white-skinned young tiger-cat—to love, laugh, wander and pillage.

“I’ll sail with you,” he grunted, shaking the red drops from his blade.

“Ho, N’Yaga!” her voice twanged like a bowstring. “Fetch herbs and dress your master’s wounds! The rest of you bring aboard the plunder and cast off.”

As Conan sat with his back against the poop-rail, while the old shaman attended to the cuts on his hands and limbs, the cargo of the ill-fated *Argus* was quickly shifted aboard the *Tigress* and stored in small cabins below deck. Bodies of the crew and of fallen pirates were cast overboard to the swarming sharks, while wounded blacks were laid in the waist to be bandaged. Then the grappling-irons were cast off, and as the *Argus* sank silently into the blood-flecked waters, the *Tigress* moved off southward to the rhythmic clack of the oars.

As they moved out over the glassy blue deep, Bêlit came to the poop. Her eyes were burning like those of a she-panther in the dark as she tore off her ornaments, her sandals and her silken girdle and cast them at his feet. Rising on tiptoe, arms stretched upward, a quivering line of naked white, she cried to the desperate horde: “Wolves of the blue sea, behold ye now the dance—the mating-dance of Bêlit, whose fathers were kings of Askalon!”

And she danced, like the spin of a desert whirlwind, like the leaping of a quenchless flame, like the urge of creation and the urge of death. Her white feet spurned the blood-stained deck and dying men forgot

death as they gazed frozen at her. Then, as the white stars glimmered through the blue velvet dusk, making her whirling body a blur of ivory fire, she threw herself at Conan's feet with a wild cry, and the blind flood of the Cimmerian's desire swept all else away as he crushed her panting form against the black plates of his corseleted breast.

MERCHANDISE AND REMINDERS

The pirate is nothing without a merchant who buys his ill-gotten merchandise. Until we understand that these unscrupulous traders are as guilty as the pirates themselves, if not more, we will not banish that scourge from the civilized world.

Astreas of Nemedra

Conan woke up in a bed covered in fur. He was alone. A beam of light entered through a window and illuminated a small, cozy cabin.

He stood with a growl and looked around. In a chair, he saw some leather trousers and a pair of sandals at its feet. He dressed quickly and went outside.

The morning was cool and the sun rose fast in a cloudless sky. The coast was a green blur far off the port side, and an endless blue sprawled at starboard out of the sky. Men of ebony skin went from one side of the deck to the other without paying the slightest attention to him, caught up in their tasks. He looked aft and saw Bêlit behind what should be the helm, speaking with a huge black man who nodded at her words.

For a moment, Conan considered the idea of going back to the cabin and getting his weapons. But the thought disappeared as fast as it had arrived and he started walking towards the stern.

When she saw him, Bêlit left the huge wheel that controlled the helm in the hands of the black man and threw herself at the Cimmerian. Her slender arms twisted around his neck and she kissed him eagerly, as if she had not seen him for days.

“Have you slept well, my lion?” she asked.

Conan nodded silently. He was not ashamed of anything that had happened, either on the deck or in the captain’s cabin, but he was still not entirely sure of the ground he was walking on. The Shemite seemed volatile in temperament and volcanic in character, and Conan sensed she could move from worship to hatred with the utmost ease.

“I’ve rested well,” he said at last.

She was not the first woman he had lain with. Surely, she would not be the last. However, there was something in her, in the dark almond eyes, the aquiline nose, the pointed chin and the stubborn jaw, in the passion with which she received him, in the way she threw herself at him that made her different from any other from his past. She seemed endowed with an inexhaustible vitality that could be a source of passion as well as ferocity; and both possibilities excited him without measure.

He put one arm around her waist and looked around. He had learned the most elementary rudiments of seamanship in the days he had spent on the *Argus*, but he knew he still had much to learn. If that place was going to be his home from then on, it was better he begin to learn about

it as soon as possible. He noticed the enormous wheel the steersman was driving and understood that, in some mysterious way, it performed the same function as the long sweep they had used on the *Argus*. Above him, the wind-filled sail was a complex enigma that had little to do with the simple square sail of the merchant ship and the jibsail that aided it. He had a lot to learn and the sooner he got to work, the better.

“Do you have anything I can do?” he asked.

She glanced at him with a half-smile, misinterpreting his question, until she followed the Cimmerian’s gaze and realized his intentions.

“You don’t have to do anything, my lion. Since yesterday you’re my partner and you’re not expected to do the work of a common sailor.”

Conan frowned. Was not that girl aware of what her words implied, of the consequences they could have for him if he listened to her? Perhaps she was safe in her role as a goddess, but he was unwilling to behave like a drone in a hive.

“If I’m going to live here from now on, if I’m going to be a part of this crew—I have to be a part of this crew,” he grunted with a frown. “Men won’t respect me just for sharing your bed.”

Bêlit bit her lip.

“My men will do what I tell them to do,” she replied proud, almost angry.

He felt the girl’s body stiffen in his arms. He had expected her to be capricious, but not so unpredictable. At that moment he realized that whatever time they spent together, he would not have a moment of boredom. And maybe no peace either.

“I’m sure you’re right,” he said in a conciliatory tone. “But I’d feel better if they respected me for myself, not just because their goddess orders it.”

She kept on gazing at him with a tight frown for a while; suddenly, her body relaxed.

“N’Gora!” she shouted, turning her face to the right.

One of the black men next to the mast ran toward them. He was a young, tall man, with an inquisitive look and a muscular but slender body.

“Conan will join the crew,” said Bêlit when the man arrived. “You’ll treat him like an apprentice and report back to me on his progress.”

Despite the curious gaze he cast on Conan, N’Gora bowed his head without a word and then motioned for the Cimmerian to accompany him. Conan went after him.

The rest of the day became a succession of small tasks and jobs that kept him occupied almost until dusk. He paid attention to the laconic instructions they gave him, and then he complied with what was expected of him quickly and diligently, without a word of protest or objection. At first, N’Gora gave him orders almost with apprehension, conscious perhaps that a complaint from the barbarian to the captain was enough to cut his head from his shoulders. However, as he became aware of Conan’s willingness and realized there was no task, however small, he refused to carry out, he gave him increasingly complex instructions and assigned him progressively complicated duties.

The barbarian learned quickly, almost fiercely, and his obedient, quiet and willing attitude did not take long to gain the respect of those around him. When day was over and he said goodbye to the crew until next morning, many faces nodded and smiled.

Bêlit was waiting for him in her cabin. The old shaman who had healed Conan's wounds was finishing setting the table and, as soon as he saw the huge Cimmerian, he left them alone.

"An interesting day?" she asked.

Conan stretched, cracking his joints.

"Intense," he replied. "And aye, interesting."

"Tired?"

"I'd eat an ox, girl, if that's what you mean."

The dangerous glow that appeared in Bêlit's eyes when she heard the 'girl' did not escape him. He pretended he had not noticed anything and sat down in front of her.

"Life on the high seas is very different from life on land," he continued, while he took the jug of wine and filled the two goblets on the table. "I guess I'll have to get used to its rules. But I think I'll manage. It's not going to be any worse or more complicated than some of the things I've been doing."

She did not answer. She took the goblet he had filled, emptied it in one sip and then placed it on the table. She did not make the slightest movement toward the food. Conan glanced at her for a few moments with an incomprehensible look until, suddenly, he burst out laughing.

“By Crom’s bones!” he said. “I am what I am, Bêlit. Accept me or kill me. But while you make a decision, I’m starving.”

Without further ceremony, he reached out and grabbed a bird’s thigh, dipped it in gravy and put it into his mouth with a vengeance. A few seconds later, he was holding a naked bone in his hand.

“What will it be?” he asked.

The day’s work had encouraged him and kept him alert, but the play with that almond-eyed tigress who was still looking up at him with a frown raised the stakes considerably.

“Should I call your lancers?” he asked. “Do I tell your shaman to prepare some poison for me? Or maybe you’d rather I throw myself to the water?”

With one slap, the pirate cleared the food off the table and grabbed a knife.

“Ah, you’d rather do the job yourself, I see.”

With a roar, Bêlit jumped toward him. In a dizzying leap, Conan intercepted her in the air, grabbed her as if she weighed nothing and squeezed her against his chest.

“I am no soft Hyborian,” he whispered, his mouth a few inches from the young woman’s, “you said so yourself. I make my own path in life and I am nobody’s complacent toy. Not even yours. If we’re going to be partners, then we will be equal in everything, at least in the eyes of one another, since we won’t be in the crew’s. I’m not your pet, I don’t pick up sticks or play dead in exchange for a bite.”

Bêlit was panting, her teeth clenched, her eyes narrowed. A low growl escaped from her throat. Her right hand was still stuck around the knife and, had Conan not held her by the wrist, she would have plunged it into the huge chest of the Cimmerian. He had handled dangerous creatures before, but he could not help thinking that even a Vanaheim saber-toothed tiger would have been less lethal than that woman.

“What do you want from me?” he asked suddenly.

Time passed around them as if it did not touch them. Very slowly, Conan loosened his grasp on the young woman and stepped back. He released her wrist.

“What do you want from me?” he repeated.

Her hand swung open and the knife pounded against the floor. The flexible and delicious body trembled, but no longer in rage. Bêlit bit her lower lip until it bled and took a step toward the Cimmerian.

She grabbed his scarred face with both hands and then nailed her mouth into his with a yearning that seemed more violence than passion. Conan swore in his teeth and then, without thinking about anything else, gave himself over to the game altogether.

Sometime later, gasping, exhausted, they ate on the floor the supper she had thrown off the table, amid drowned laughter and inquisitive glances.

“A lion and a tigress,” she muttered. “Maybe it’s not the smartest matchup in the world.”

He shrugged. He reached up and explored her haughty face with a rough, clumsy tenderness.