



THIS IS THE LONG WAY TO THE SOUTH GATE. WHY TAKE THE PATH BY THE WHARF, SIRE?

THERE'S SOMETHING I MUST CHECK ON.



THERE! FASHIONED BY THE BEST SHIPBUILDERS IN ARGOS AND SHEMA AND GIVEN FORM BY THE FINEST CRAFTSMEN IN MY KINGDOM. THE SEAS HAVE NEVER KNOWN ITS LIKE!



MAGNIFICENT!

THOUGH A BIT OVERWROUGHT FOR A FISHING TRIP, I'D SAY.



IT'S NOT FISHING THAT I HAVE IN MIND, YOU SLY DOG.

IN MY TIME, I'VE GAZED UPON THE LENGTH AND BREADTH OF THE KNOWN WORLD. BUT MEN SAY THAT WEST, ACROSS THE OCEAN, OTHER WORLDS LIE WAITING. I WILL SEE THEM.



AYE, CRASSUS, I SWEAR TO YOU-- MY BONES WON'T BE BURIED HERE!



A DAMN PICTISH RELIC? WHAT AM I TO DO WITH IT?

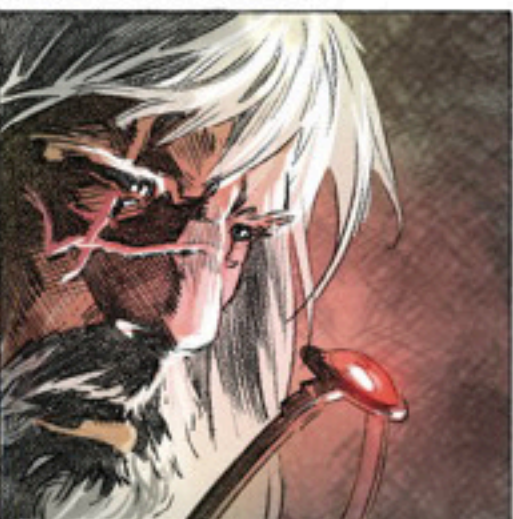
I KNOW NOT! PERHAPS GIVE IT TO THE PRIESTS OF MITRA TO SEAL FOREVER WITHIN THE VAULTS OF THE GREAT TEMPLE?!



I'LL PROMISE YOU NOTHING, GALT. I FEEL NO FEAR OF THIS CIRCLE OF IRON AND STONE, BUT IF TAKING IT BRINGS YOU SOME MEASURE OF PEACE, SO BE IT.



YOU *SHOULD* FEAR, SIRE. BE WARY, I BEG YOU! THIS THING WASN'T FORGED FOR THE BROWS OF CIVILIZED MEN!



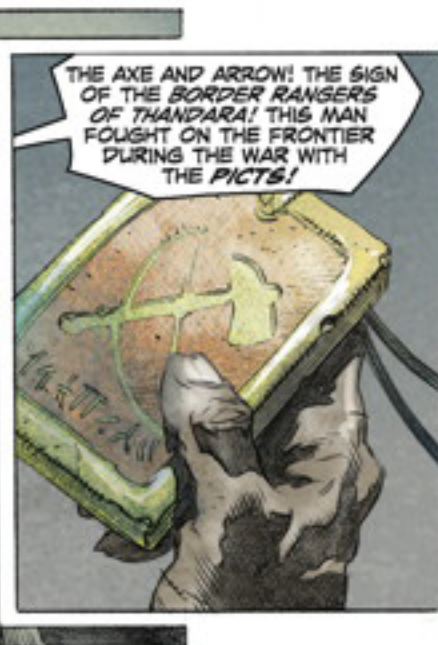
THEN YOU PLACE IT IN GOOD HANDS. CROM KNOWS NONE IN THIS KINGDOM WOULD CALL ME CIVILIZED.

CRASSUS, HAVE A ROOM PREPARED. GALT WILL BE MY GUEST UNTIL HE FEELS FIT TO TRAVEL.



ETERNAL THANKS, BUT *NO*. I'LL TROUBLE YOU NO MORE. NOR WILL I LIVE ANOTHER NIGHT BENEATH THE SAME ROOF AS THAT PICTISH THING!

FAREWELL.







SHLRPF!
FORGIVE ME. IT'S BEEN DAYS SINCE MY LAST MEAL... AND NEVER HAVE I SAT TO A FEAST SUCH AS THIS.

WOULD YOU NOT DO THE SAME FOR ME, RANGER GALLT, WERE OUR FORTUNES REVERSED?



SO THE STORIES ARE ALL TRUE. YOU'RE A MAN OF HONOR AND DUTY. A MAN TO TRUST.



HOW WE **ACHED** TO JOIN YOUR CAUSE WHEN YOU RAISED ARMS AGAINST THE OLD KING, NUMEDIDES!

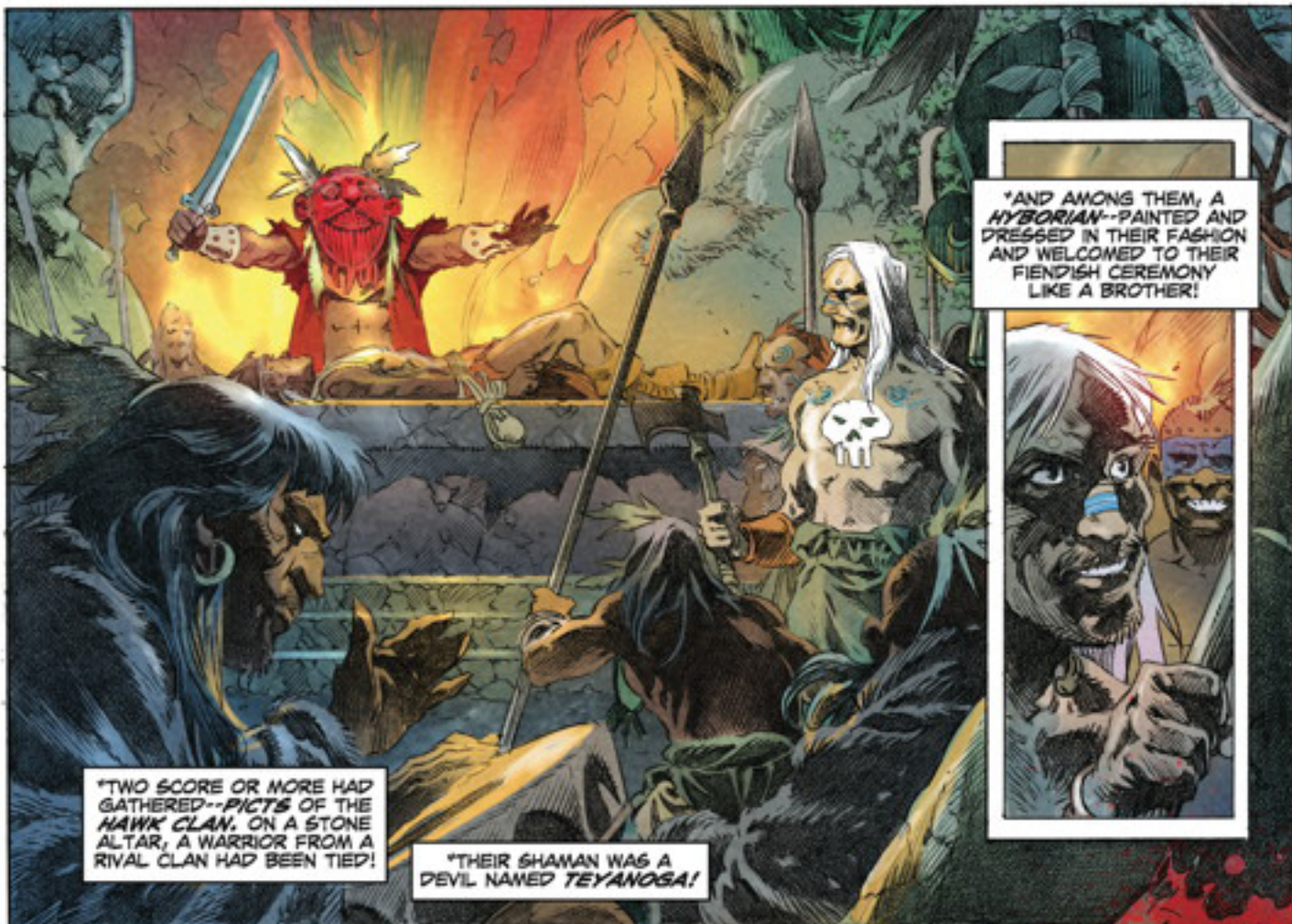
YOU WERE A HERO TO US! CONAN, THE CIMMERIAN SCOUT WHOM EVEN THE PICTS FEARED! CONAN, WHO SAVED COUNTLESS SETTLERS FROM THE MASSACRE OF CONAJOHARA--MY FAMILY AMONG THEM!



BUT WE OF THE FRONTIER HAD CONCERNS OF OUR OWN. OUR WAR WITH THE PICTS WAS UNENDING. THAT SEASON, THEIR ATTACKS ON US INCREASED.



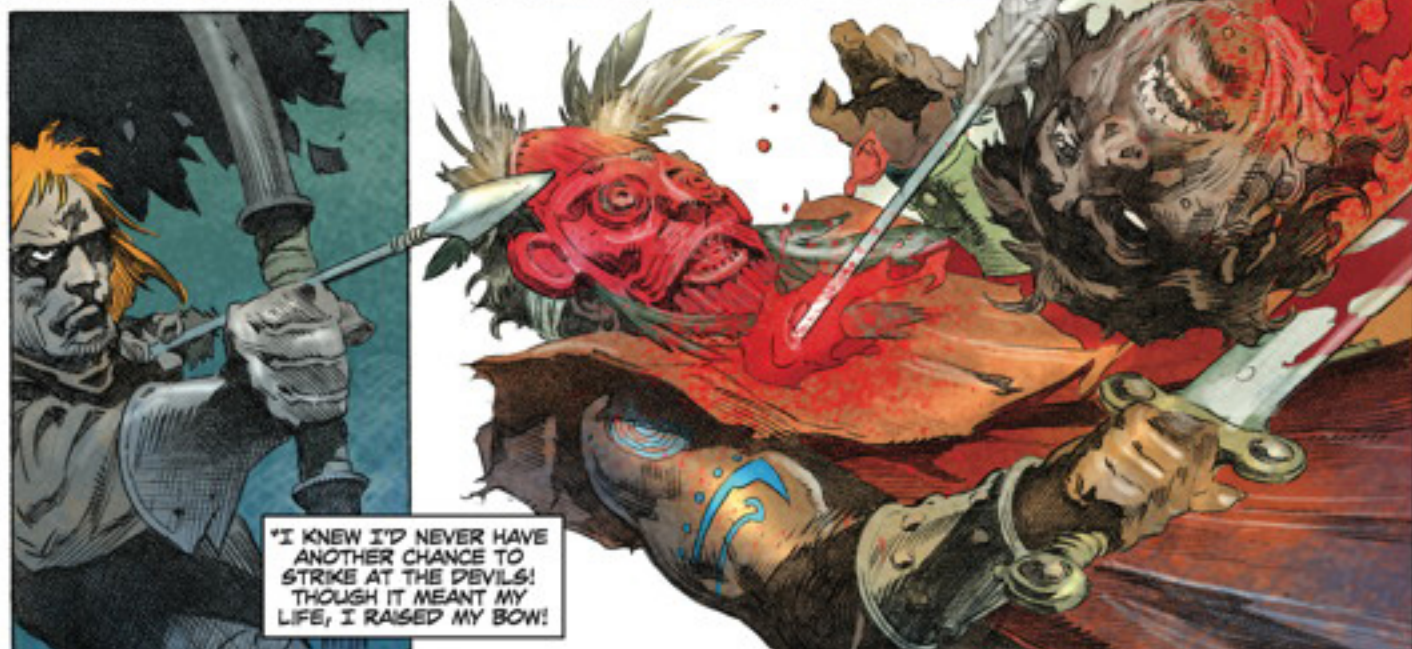
"THE NIGHT WAS BLACK AS A WITCH'S HATE. I WAS SCOUTING THE TERRITORY BEYOND THE THUNDER RIVER WHEN I HEARD THE MUTTER OF DRUMS.



"TWO SCORE OR MORE HAD GATHERED--PICTS OF THE HAWK CLAN. ON A STONE ALTAR, A WARRIOR FROM A RIVAL CLAN HAD BEEN TIED!

"THEIR SHAMAN WAS A DEVIL NAMED TEYANOGA!

"AND AMONG THEM, A HYBORIAN-PAINTED AND DRESSED IN THEIR FASHION AND WELCOMED TO THEIR FIENDISH CEREMONY LIKE A BROTHER!



"I KNEW I'D NEVER HAVE ANOTHER CHANCE TO STRIKE AT THE DEVILS! THOUGH IT MEANT MY LIFE, I RAISED MY BOW!



"BUT LUCK AND THE GODS SEEMED WITH ME. THROUGH THE LONG NIGHT I FLED, UNTIL THEIR WHOOPS AND CRIES FADED BEHIND ME.



"IT WAS ALMOST DAYBREAK WHEN I CROSSED THE RIVER AND REACHED THE VILLAGE OF *SCHOHIRA*.



"IN A TAVERN I TOLD MY TALE. NO SOONER HAD I SPOKEN THAN A NEW PATRON DARKENED THE DOOR.


"BEL'S BALLS, IT WAS *HE*--THE VERY MAN WHOM I'D SEEN WITH THE PICTS! HIS NAME WAS *VALERIAN*, AND HE WAS AN IMPORTANT LORD IN THE TOWN!




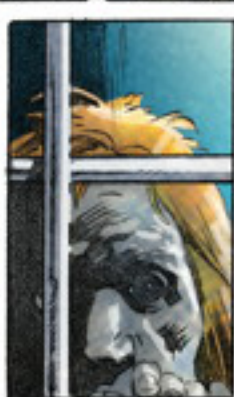
"THE TRAITOR DENIED MY CHARGE UNTIL I SHOWED MY BROTHERS THE PICTISH MARK UPON HIS CHEST! HE WAS TAKEN AWAY IN CHAINS TO AWAIT HIS TRIAL.



"BUT THAT VERY NIGHT, VALERIAN ESCAPED THROUGH THE AID OF HIS HALF-CASTE PICTISH MISTRESS, A WITCH CALLED *KWARADA*!




"MY BROTHER RANGERS
AND I TRACKED THEM TO A
LONE CABIN NEAR LYNX CREEK,
ABANDONED BY SOME SETTLER
FAMILY YEARS BEFORE.




"INSIDE WERE VALERIAN
AND KWARADA! WITH THEM,
OTHER HYBORIANS--
GUNDERMAN RENEGADES
OF FOUL REPUTE--
LOCKED IN PARLEY WITH
WAR LEADERS FROM THE
PICTS' GREAT TRIBES!

"THE TRAITOR SOUGHT TO
TAKE ADVANTAGE OF
THE TURMOIL CAUSED BY
YOUR UPRISING AGAINST
NUMEDIDES TO ELEVATE
HIMSELF TO THE THRONE!



"WITH THE CIVILIZED NATIONS IN
CONFUSION, HE IMPLORING THE PICT
TRIBES TO UNITE AS ONE AND SWEEP
INTO THE EAST--FIRST TO AGULONIA,
THEN TO NEMEDIA AND BEYOND!

"TO SEAL THEIR TRUST,
THE TRAITOR HAD BROUGHT
THEM A SACRED GIFT,
ONCE THOUGHT LOST...AN
ANCIENT CROWN THAT
KWARADA HAD ACQUIRED!
AT THE SIGHT OF IT, THE
PICTISH CHIEFTAINS GASPED!



"THE TRAITOR'S MAD SCHEME
WOULD NEVER BE REALIZED.
MY BROTHER RANGERS AND
I STORMED THE CABIN!




"TEYANOGA HAD ESCAPED DEATH ONCE. I MADE SURE HE WOULDN'T DO SO AGAIN! MY THRUST SENT HIM TUMBLING AGAINST KWARADA AND THE CROWN!



"SURELY THE RELIC WAS THE KEY TO VALERIAN'S PLAN! I KNEW I HAD TO REACH IT...



"...AND MAKE IT MINE!



"WHAT HAPPENED TO THE OTHERS, I DO NOT KNOW.



"FROM THAT MOMENT FORTH, ONLY THE CROWN MATTERED!"



AND I HAVE POSSESSED IT AND KEPT IT SAFE TILL THIS VERY HOUR.



SINCE THAT DAY LONG AGO, MY LIFE HAS BEEN CURSED! DOOM AND DESPAIR HAVE DOGGED MY EVERY STEP!

AT FIRST, MY PURPOSE WAS TO HIDE THE CROWN FROM OUR ENEMIES. BUT HOUR BY HOUR, YEAR BY YEAR, ITS GRIP ON MY LIFE TIGHTENED!

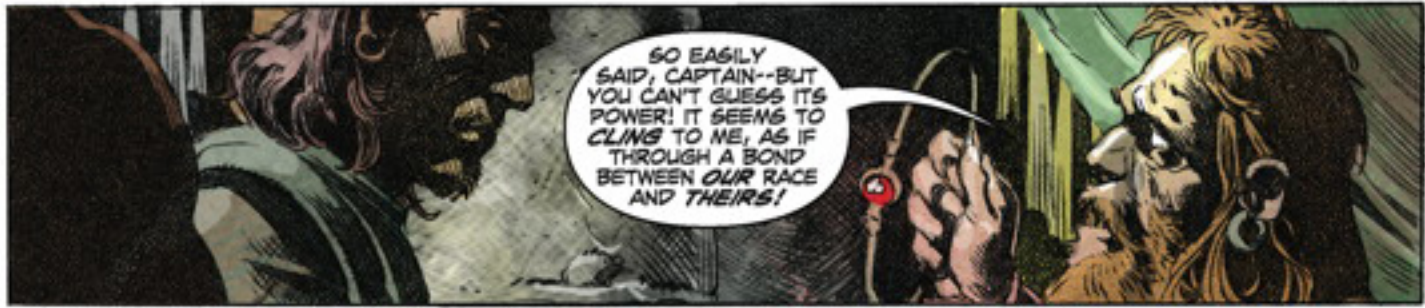


FORSAKING ALL, I LOST EVERYTHING.



MY FAMILY, COMMISSION, LAND...EVERYTHING I HELD DEAR. THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERED WAS TO HIDE THE CROWN AND KEEP IT SAFE!

YOU COULDN'T HAVE THROWN THE THING INTO A RIVER AND BEEN DONE WITH IT?



SO EASILY SAID, CAPTAIN--BUT YOU CAN'T GUESS ITS POWER! IT SEEMS TO CLING TO ME, AS IF THROUGH A BOND BETWEEN OUR RACE AND THEIRS!



LATELY I'VE BEEN TORMENTED BY STRANGE THOUGHTS--DREAMS OF DEADLY SHADOWS THAT FOLLOW ME, SEEKING TO REPOSSESS THE CROWN!



IT'S THESE NIGHTMARES THAT HAVE AT LAST GIVEN ME THE COURAGE TO DO WHAT MUST BE DONE! I BEG YOU, SIRE, TAKE IT FROM ME! I WILL ENTRUST IT ONLY TO YOU!