







I AM SORRY, CAPTAIN, THAT I CANNOT REMAIN TO EASE YOUR LAST HOURS, BUT I HAVE DUTIES TO PERFORM IN YONDER CITY--

--I MUST NOT KEEP YOUR DELICIOUS QUEEN WAITING! HA!



SO I LEAVE YOU TO YOUR OWN DEVICES-- AND THOSE BEAUTIES!

WERE IT NOT FOR THEM, I IMAGINE THAT A POWERFUL BRUTE LIKE YOURSELF SHOULD LIVE ON THE CROSS FOR DAYS.



DO NOT CHERISH ANY ILLUSIONS OF RESCUE BECAUSE I AM LEAVING YOU UNSGUARDED.

I HAVE HAD IT PROCLAIMED THAT ANYONE SEEKING TO TAKE YOUR BODY, LIVING OR DEAD, FROM THE CROSS WILL BE FLAYED ALIVE, TOGETHER WITH ALL THE MEMBERS OF HIS FAMILY, IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE.

I AM LEAVING NO GUARD BECAUSE THE VULTURES WILL NOT APPROACH AS LONG AS ANYONE IS NEAR, AND I DO NOT WISH THEM TO FEEL ANY CONSTRAINT.

AND SO, BRAVE CAPTAIN, FAREWELL! I WILL REMEMBER YOU WHEN, IN AN HOUR, TARAMIS LIES IN MY ARMS--



PFT




REMEMBER *ME* WHEN THE VULTURES ARE TEARING AT YOUR LIVING FLESH!

THE DESERT SCAVENGERS ARE A PARTICULARLY VORACIOUS BREED.




I HAVE SEEN MEN HANG FOR HOURS ON A CROSS... EYELESS, EARLESS, AND SCALPLESS...

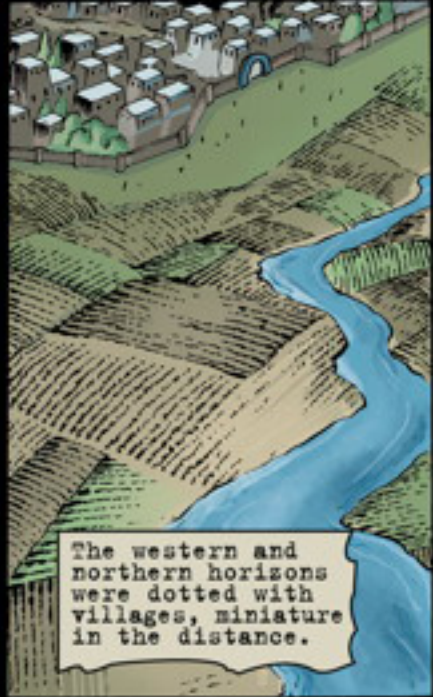
... BEFORE THE SHARP BEAKS HAD EATEN THEIR WAY INTO THEIR VITALS...



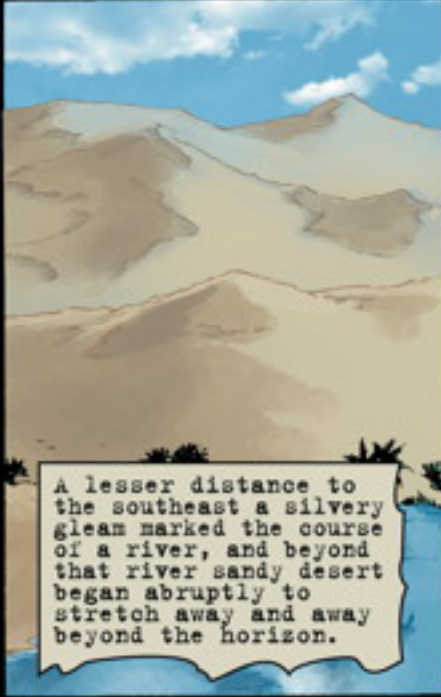
Shaking the sweat out of his eyes, Conan stared blankly at the familiar terrain.




On either side of the city, and beyond it, stretched the fertile meadowlands, with cattle browsing in the distance where fields and vineyards checked the plain.



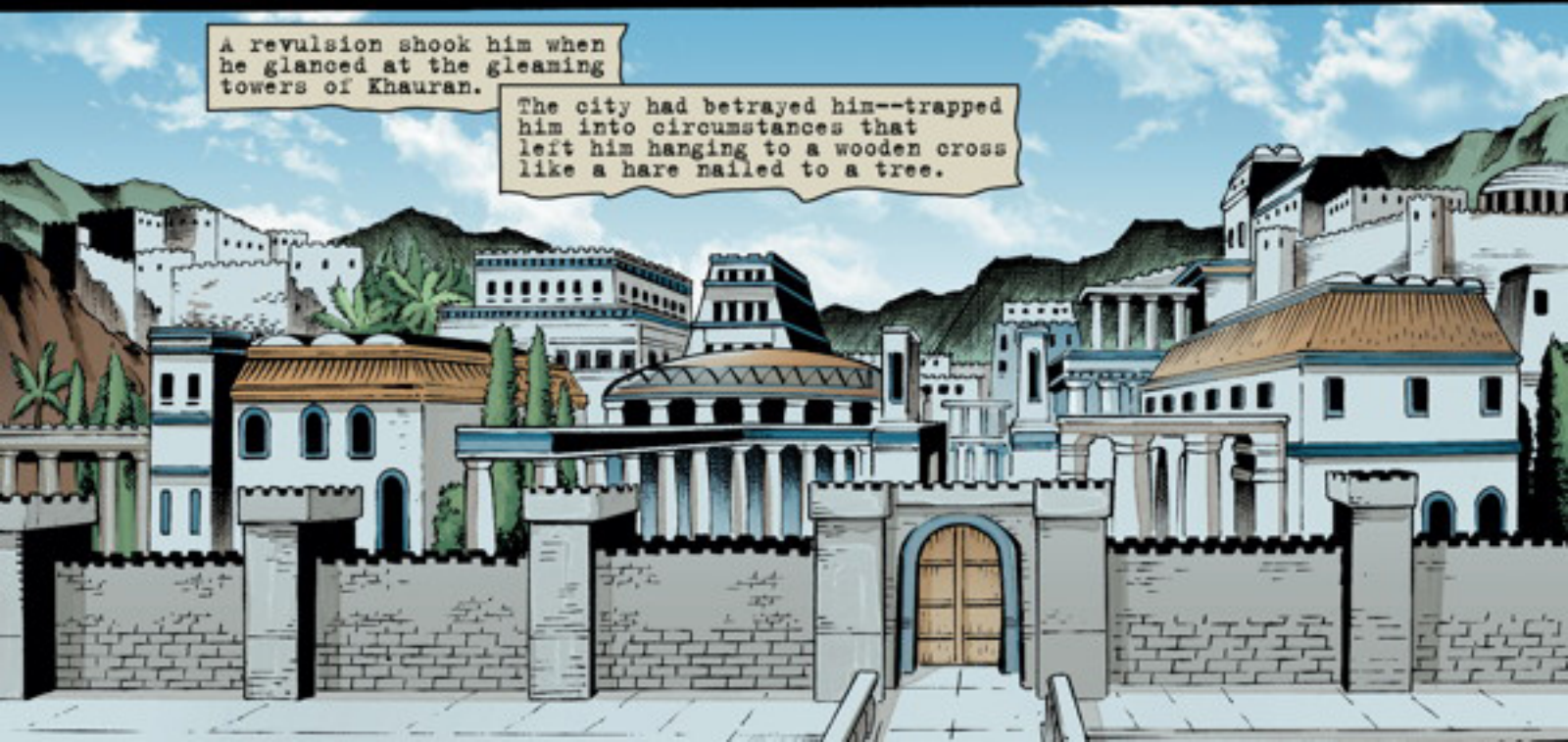
The western and northern horizons were dotted with villages, miniature in the distance.



A lesser distance to the southeast a silvery gleam marked the course of a river, and beyond that river sandy desert began abruptly to stretch away and away beyond the horizon.

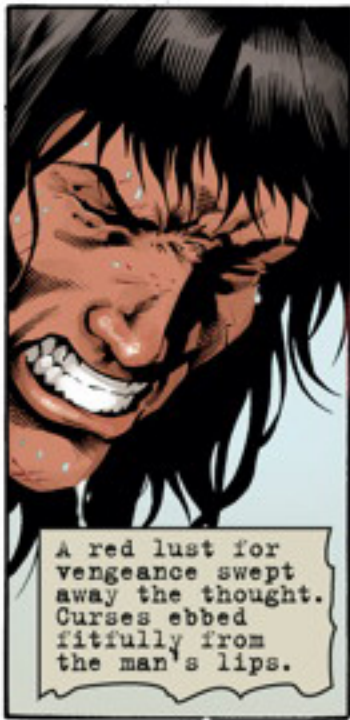


Conan stared at that expanse of empty waste shimmering tawnily in the late sunlight as a trapped hawk stares at the open sky.

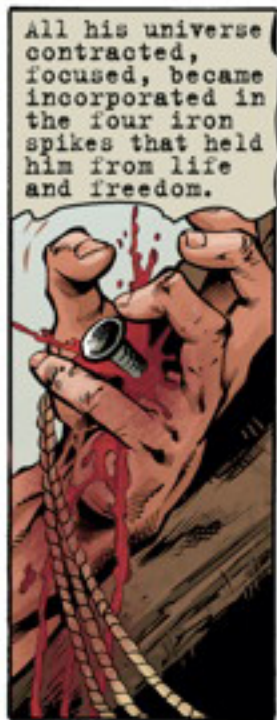


A revulsion shook him when he glanced at the gleaming towers of Khauran.

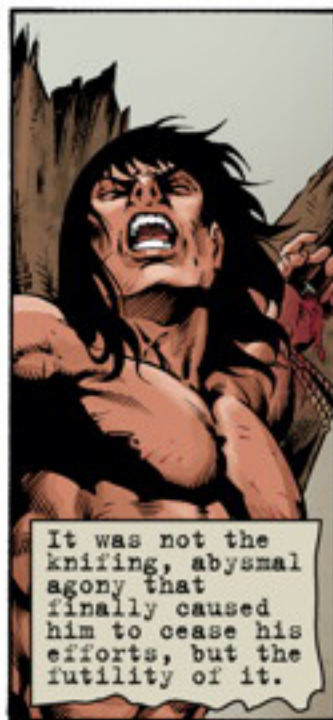
The city had betrayed him--trapped him into circumstances that left him hanging to a wooden cross like a hare nailed to a tree.



A red lust for vengeance swept away the thought. Curses ebbed fitfully from the man's lips.



All his universe contracted, focused, became incorporated in the four iron spikes that held him from life and freedom.



It was not the knifing, abysmal agony that finally caused him to cease his efforts, but the futility of it.



The spike heads were broad and heavy; he could not drag them through the wounds.



A surge of helplessness shook the giant...



...for the first time in his life.