

EXCERPT: CONAN AND THE LIVING PLAGUE

Chapter Nine

The mercenaries gathered about the spot Conan had found. Soon the soil was cleared away and a great slab of dark and somber stone was revealed. It was clearly a door set into a frame of bedrock that receded into the earth on all sides. The slab's surface was worked with stately designs that surrounded a much-faded depiction of the baronial crest of Dulcine.

"This is the entrance to a tomb," grumbled Conan.

"Correct," said Adrastus in matter-of-fact tones. "The nobility of Dulcine have long favored interring their dead in catacombs. They still do, and the tombs of the old city are connected with the tombs of the new. I-ah-paid a grave robber well for this information."

Conan looked to where Balthano crawled about the slab's circumference, using a dagger to dig black moss out of the space between the door and its frame. He shrugged sullenly. No grave robber had passed through this portal in generations.

Prince Eoreck stood in Shullar's shadow. He held out a hand to his bodyguard and the asshuri pulled a heavy wineskin from beneath his arm and gave it to the prince. Eoreck flourished his bright cloak and cleared his throat for attention.

"I see there are a number of superstitious ninnies among us. Young Pezur looks ready to weep, and Orbash has made the sign of the horns so many times that his hand must be growing sore. Are we old women that we cower from an empty tomb? Come, here is a skin of the best and strongest wine that the king's nephew can afford. I'll share it with you. Let us not shrink away from a few shadows and dry skeletons. Let us drink, journey through the catacombs, and help ourselves to the riches of Dulcine. Here, Captain Conan, take the skin and drink. You know that the dead can never hurt you."

The barbarian could have told him differently; instead he accepted the wineskin and took a huge swallow. As the vintage was fully as excellent as the Prince had proclaimed, Conan took a second sizable gulp before he passed it to Shamtare.

"Now we must lift the slab," muttered Adrastus, half to himself. "How shall we accomplish that?"

Conan wiped his mouth by drawing a heavy forearm over his lips. He pointed to the upper left corner of the door's frame. "The stone is crumbling there. If we chip at it a bit, we should be able to get under the door and pry it up."

Fat Orbash of the emerald earrings volunteered his stout Vanir dagger for use as a chisel, and Shullar used a small mace as a mallet. Soon, after much hammering and clearing away of debris, the corner of the door became visible.

The wineskin made a final round and was discarded as the men readied themselves for the task of hoisting the massive slab up out of its bed. Shullar's thick fingers couldn't wedge into the small gap he'd chiseled in the frame. Conan shouldered him aside and earned a resentful glare for his efforts. The barbarian dropped into a low squat, dug his hands in around the door's corner, threw back his powerful shoulders, and drew a deep breath. His legs tensed; the muscles of his thighs sprang into corded relief. He exhaled harshly through clenched teeth and began to stand. The slab shifted and a puff of fetid air erupted around its rim as the seal between the upper world and the lower was broken. The stone door rose slowly as the barbarian, shuddering with effort, heaved upwards until its lower rim came free of the jealous earth. The instant this handhold appeared, Shamtare, Orbash, and a dozen others hurled themselves against the door. The mercenaries jostled one another as they gripped the stone slab and hoisted with all the force they could muster. The air filled with grunts, gasps and curses. The door lifted higher, and now all save Prince Eoreck and the wizard Adrastus plied their strength against its ponderous weight. One end ground against the bottom of its frame while the other rose painfully into a vertical position. The men skirted the black maw they had uncovered and heaved the door over.

"Get clear!" bellowed the barbarian as the giant slab teetered briefly on end. It toppled and struck the weed-grown ground with an impact that shook the earth. Dust rose in tawny billows around it.

A ragged cheer erupted from the sweating men, a cheer that faded weakly when they saw what had been revealed. The inner surface of the door was carved with rows of blackly leering skulls. Clusters of pallid beetles scuttled in

blind flight from the intrusive sunlight. The doorway itself was a black square cut from the heart of midnight. The stench of death rose from it like an evil vapor.

"Sweet Ishtar," whispered Pezur.

Adrastus advanced to the portal's rim and peered within. The afternoon sun made small inroads into the stubborn world of night below. Conan could see that a hollow chamber of stone opened into the earth. The floor was smooth, damp and stained where the light hit it. The mercenaries were so quiet that one might imagine that they held their breath. Adrastus looked them over and a sardonic smile pulled at his lips. He lowered himself awkwardly until he sat on the doorway's rim with his blue robes bunched up about his waist.

"Nothing to be afraid of," he said, and jumped in. The men stepped forward in unison, eyes wide as they stared into the open tomb. Adrastus stood in the patch of yellow sunlight ten feet below. He waved at them.

"Gather some brush to conceal the portal. We don't want any scouts of Eruk's army to happen upon our little secret, do we? Well, come on. Don't just stand about staring." The wizard's bantering tone shamed the mercenaries, some of whom went in search of brush, while the others leapt down into the crypt to join him. Conan was among the latter.

Shullar gripped Eoreck's arm, bent and lowered him effortlessly through the portal while Conan examined the hidden tomb. The barbarian's instinctive fear of the supernatural caused his wilderness-bred senses to awaken to their fullest. His keen eyes cut through the gloom as his swordhand crept to his shoulder and touched at his hilt tensely.

The tomb was octagonal and ringed with funereal friezes cut directly into its bleak stone walls. Opening the portal had removed one of the panels of its domed ceiling. At the center of the room stood a low dais that held an empty stone coffin with a split lid. On the east wall was a black doorway protected by a grate of slender bars heavily encrusted with scarlet rust. Pezur, drawn to the metal gate, stared between its disintegrating bars into the murk beyond.

"There's a hall through here," he said in a small voice. "There's a hallway beneath the earth." His hand touched the bars, and flakes of soft rust stuck to his inquisitive fingers. He tugged at the gate, gently at first, then harder when it wouldn't come loose. It stuck, then broke free and lurched toward him with a

screech like a crushed rat. The archer jerked away, snatched back his hand as if the cold bars had scalded him.

"Not yet, soldier," said Adrastus. "I've brought a few torches to light our way." Balthano struck flint and steel while the last remaining mercenaries above finished draping cut saplings and loose chunks of brush over the portal's mouth. When all of the men were in the room, Adrastus gave a torch to Conan, who was to lead the party. A second torch was given to the fat Shemite Orbash, who apparently found the task of bringing up the rear quite agreeable. Many men seemed disappointed both with the perceived paucity of torches and the fact that they were not allowed to bear one.

"Follow me and this will be swiftly over," said Adrastus. "We are to proceed east with but few deviations, turns that I know well from the study of a fine map."

The gate was drawn open with a mournful squall of hinges, and the party filed into a dark passageway that snaked beneath the earth. Once away from the open portal, the air grew cool and thick with dank moisture. The men murmured softly to one another, as if reluctant to break the tomb's timeless silence. It was difficult to believe that the sun shone down on a warm field a few feet above their heads while they wandered through this forgotten corridor of eternal night.

Conan's torch illuminated a once elegant hallway, paneled with plates of discolored marble and decorated with morbid bas-reliefs. Sculpted death's heads grinned at the intruders from corners and cornices. The Cimmerian drew to a halt and held his torch out into a four-way intersection.

"Which way, sorcerer?"

"Straight on," said Adrastus without hesitation.

The passage seemed to lower more deeply into the earth. Open doorways gaped to either side, offering admittance to small chambers like the one they had used to gain entrance to this subterranean maze. The walls began to show greater signs of age and considerable water damage. At one point a thick marble slab lay fallen into the corridor, admitting a dark mass of moist soil that spilled over the floor. Conan thought that the earth exposed by the fallen panel appeared hollowed, as if dug into the wall. He was struck by the horrible suspicion that if he were to dig at the loose earth there, he would uncover a tunnel that wound away

in darkness to secret places beneath the hills, warrens forever hidden from the eyes of men. His scalp tingled.

Ahead, the knotted root of a tree thrust through a rent in the low-hanging ceiling. It seemed to probe blindly into the hall like the twisted tentacle of some misplaced squid. Conan ducked around it and came upon an arch that looked to be at the point of collapse.

The crumbling arch was blackened and gnawed by age. It opened on a dark chamber from which emanated a thin trickling sound, as of a small stream. Conan thrust the smoking torch into the room and wrinkled his nose at the stench within. As he advanced, Pezur and Adrastus followed close behind.

"A fountain!" exclaimed the archer. His thin face became childlike with wonder. "What is a fountain doing in a tomb?"

"Some faiths hold that a fountain freshens the air of a crypt. Others that it allows the departing spirits of loved ones a final drink," replied Adrastus absently. The sorcerer looked to each of the chamber's three additional doorways, one at each point of the compass, and rubbed his bearded chin in perplexity.

"I trust that the spirits drank their fill, for the air in here is fouler than that of a kennel," growled Conan. The Cimmerian drew near the low fountain and muttered a curse. "Ymir and Bori! It's not ghosts that have been drinking here."

The fountain was a simple raised pool, the rim of which was a wide bench of pale and filthy marble. In the pool's center, dark water ran in a slender stream from the proffered hands of a small statue of the goddess Ashtoreth, scarcely identifiable beneath a disfiguring coat of black mold. The barbarian lowered his torch so that its light shimmered on the inky water. "Look."

The mold and dirt of the fountain's marble rim was smeared, marked by innumerable handprints. Where individual prints were discernible, the hands appeared strangely small, inordinately long-fingered, and sharply taloned.

"Ghouls here?!" Adrastus gasped, then thrust a hand to his mouth as if to silence himself. "It is nothing," he added hurriedly. "Ghouls are timid creatures and prefer the cold flesh of corpses. Let us move on. I believe that the east passage is the correct one."

"You believe..." said Shamtare with bitter sarcasm. Adrastus turned as if to upbraid the Shemite, but when he parted his lips to speak there came a high, shrill

chittering from the halls they had just traversed. The wizard spun and stared back through the crumbling arch. His eyes went hollow with fear and his mouth hung slackly open, still poised for a retort that was lost now and forever forgotten.

"Crom." Conan's sword came out, gleaming like a firebrand in the light of his torch. "Everyone to the east door. Follow the wizard."

The clustered men looked to Adrastus, who still stared as if hypnotized into the menacing darkness beyond the arch. He tore his gaze free and stumbled toward the exit he had chosen. His hands delved clumsily into the blue folds of his cloak and pulled forth a thick roll of black velvet. Balthano, knives bared, went after him, casting a single glance back over his shoulder. Orbash and the others crowded close behind. Pezur began to follow and hesitated when he saw that neither Conan nor Shamtare had moved.

"Aren't you coming?" The archer's voice had risen an octave and might have made the Cimmerian smile under different circumstances.

"Go on, Shamtare," said the barbarian. "I'll bring up the rear."

"I won't let you face those things alone," said the older man. Shamtare's face shone pasty white in the dimness. The hand that gripped his sword trembled as if with a palsy.

"Go on, you dotard. I'm not going to stay here. I'll be right behind you."

"For Anu's mercy, come along Shamtare," called Pezur. "Don't worry about Conan. You're holding us up."

As if in response the sharp chittering came again, more loud and insistent than before. And this time it was answered from the south doorway by a low, whining snarl. A muted chorus of bestial mutters floated up out of the darkness like the whispering wings of a cloud of bats.

"Holy Ishtar!" Shamtare's bulging eyes darted from one black doorway to the other. Conan turned and shoved him toward Pezur. The archer seized Shamtare's arm and sought to draw him into the east hallway.

"Go!" bellowed the barbarian. He backed toward the corridor as low, black figures leapt from the south and west doorways.

Conan thrust out the torch with a savage roar of defiance. His skin crawled with superstitious dread. The flickering flame gave him a swift glimpse of three hurtling forms, man-like, yet traveling on all fours. Gleam-eyed shadows arose in

an army behind them, following the leaders of their pack. The barbarian had a fragmented, nightmare vision of pallid canine faces with bristling muzzles that gaped to reveal jagged yellow fangs and lolling crimson tongues; of patchy, mold-clotted fur covering surging, wiry bodies.

Then they were upon the Cimmerian, slamming into him, swarming up his body and tearing at his limbs. The torch was ripped from his grasp and cast aside. It burst on the tomb's floor like a dying comet, scattering orange sparks.

Absolute darkness flooded the crypt. Cold, damp talons closed on Conan's throat. The sheer physical weight of the ghouls gave the barbarian a surge of berserker's confidence. These were creatures of flesh, not bodiless specters of the night. And flesh is prey to steel.

With a mighty convulsion, Conan heaved the tomb-dwellers away from him. His sword sheared the ghoul at his throat nigh in half and sent its spouting body sailing into the far wall. The beast that tore at his torch-hand was hoisted high overhead and brought down upon the third, clinging at his waist, with force that shattered bone.

He was free. The blackness that pressed in around him swarmed with shrill chitters and mewling. Hooves scuffed on the stone floor as the horde rushed forward. The warcry of a Cimmerian tribesman echoed through the catacombs as Conan whipped his heavy blade in an unstoppable circular swath from left to right and back again. The charging ghouls hit the barrier of steel and were cut down, crushed asunder, and hurled aside. Foul blood sprayed as the tomb-herd was thrown back upon itself. Thin, keening cries of rage and agony grated in the barbarian's ears. When his blade met no resistance, Conan ducked into the east doorway, lunged unerringly through the narrow opening in the impenetrable murk. The dim, welcome glow of a torch shone ahead.

The barbarian plunged down the passage. He snarled in repugnance at the memory of the crypt-dwellers unclean touch. Raw wounds stung on his neck, thighs and arms. Behind came the patter and clatter of hooved feet and the sick titter of the pursuing ghouls.

Ahead, the slender hall opened into a room-sized mausoleum. Two severely plain sarcophagi lay side by side upon a low platform of stone. In his desperate haste the Cimmerian saw only the haunting glow of the torch, faint as a

will-o-the-wisp, as it receded through the opposite doorway. He ran full into the side of the first sarcophagus and its hard rim struck him at mid-thigh. The headlong impact drove the weighty coffin off its base with a rasp and clatter that obscured the barbarian's guttural cry of pain. Conan's body flew over the first sarcophagus and twisted in mid-air to slam lengthwise into the second. The Cimmerian hit the floor with all the breath shocked from his lungs. He lay, half stunned, while precious moments fled and his ghastly pursuers closed in.

Hooves clacked into the chamber, then clapped onto the lid of the dislodged coffin as the leading ghoul bounded atop it. A triumphant titter rose above the prone barbarian and a pair of eyes, as flaringly scarlet as stoked coals, gloated down upon him. Conan uncoiled, came to his feet and lashed out with the sword in a tigerish explosion of violence. The ghoul on the sarcophagus was smashed back into his fellows. The horde snarled and gibbered in response, then surged forward in a tide of vile bodies.

Conan leapt up onto the second coffin, and bent his knees to catch his balance as the lid shifted with a dull rattle. He faced his foes in darkness and knew that if he turned his back on them now they would drag him down like a pack of rabid hounds. The broadsword sang as it cut the stale air of the tomb, and again the night-creatures were hurled back by its relentless swath. A ghoul scuttled beneath his blade and batted onto the barbarian's left leg. Talons like chisels sank into his thigh and calf. Baboon-like fangs closed on his ankle in a grip like a steel vise. Only the thick leather of his boot saved his flesh from the jagged teeth, while the terrific pressure of the thing's jaws threatened to crush his ankle into splinters of bone. Conan whirled the blade about and drove its point down through the ghoul's spine so that it struck and grated on the coffin lid beneath. The Cimmerian tore his weapon free, kicked the mortally wounded ghoul away, and yellow light abruptly filled the chamber.

"Conan!" came a familiar voice from behind him. "Here!"

The Cimmerian risked a glance back over his shoulder in time to see Shamtare standing in the chamber's opposite doorway, already in the act of tossing him a burning torch. With a sulfurous oath, Conan twisted and snatched the brand from the air. He swung back to face the ghouls just as the ravaging horde drove forward once again.

The torch's light revealed them to be even more hideous than his fearful imagination had painted them in the concealing darkness. They were short, hunched bipeds with hooved feet and clawed, simian hands, yet the loathsome things appeared as comfortable on all fours as upright. The flesh of their arms, legs, and ratlike snouts was bare, corpse-pale and rubbery. Lank, hairless tails hung from their hindquarters, lending them further semblance to monstrously overgrown graveyard rats. Fully a score of them bore down on the barbarian, chittering like maddened apes and squinting crimson eyes accustomed to midnight gloom. They met fire and steel. The sword swept three aside, spilled them over the stone floor in a tangled welter of limbs. The torch was thrust into the chest of a bold ghoul and ignited its moldy fur. It fell back, squalling and beating its burning breast. But the mass of them came on, apparently unmoved by the fate of their brethren. Conan's blade swung like a remorseless scythe, but he knew that they would overwhelm him with sheer numbers if he were not soon relieved.

A star flew over Conan's right shoulder and lit among the clustered ghouls. The Cimmerian blinked as the fist-sized ball of white incandescence struck the tomb's floor, bounced, and blazed up to eye-searing brilliance. A horrid cry came from the crypt-dwellers. They pressed foul talons over blinded eyes and reeled away from the light.

The shining sphere emitted a hiss like an angry viper and burned still brighter. Conan lifted an arm to shield his dazzled eyes. The additional illumination proved too much for the ghouls, who broke and fled out the doorway, streaming away down the narrow passage amid much mewling lamentation. In a moment the only ghouls that remained were those the barbarian had slain.

Conan faced the opposite doorway, where Shamtare stood beside Adrastus. Both looked pale and unwell in the stark, unnatural light. The Cimmerian laughed harshly. The thighs of his breeches were shredded and the top of his left boot was nearly torn away. There were talon marks on his bare arms and his own blood mingled with splashes of the ghouls' vile ichor. Yet his hard face was split by a wide, white grin and his laughter rang through the bleak chambers of the dead.

"Hah! A neat enough trick, sorcerer. Why didn't you think of it sooner?"

Adrastus fumbled at his star pendant with one hand and clutched a fistful of blue cloak with the other. "I was frightened," he said finally. "I am a mage of small and specialized skills. Combat is new to me."

Conan nodded, still smiling. "An honest answer. More than I might have expected of you." The little fireball began to change color, fading slowly to russet gold. "Come along," continued the Cimmerian. "Let us be on our way before those corpse-gnawers decide we are a meal worth dying for."

They moved quickly into the east hall, met with Balthano and Pezur, and lit a precious additional torch. Adrastus led with one held high aloft; Shamtare and Conan brought up the rear with the other two.

Behind them, the sorcerous light dimmed to dusky crimson, as though it sprang from a lantern of garnet. Then it guttered out.