

AGE OF CONAN: CIMMERIAN RAGE: Legends of Kern, Volume 2

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On the shadowed side of a Breakneck ridgeline, Kern Wolf-Eye scrambled along a narrow switchback, clawing for purchase among cold, sharp-edged hardscrabble and granite boulders, fighting his way upward over the treacherous ground. Frozen slush. Loose stone. Thorny brush.

The ends of his fingers bled where he'd cracked several nails down to the quick. His chest heaved as he gulped the cold, thin air. It tasted of ice and felt like a dull knife stabbing into his chest.

No slowing down. No rest. Even the thought of it was driven from his mind as another arrow sliced in close—tight enough he felt the whisper of its passing—and shattered against the sharp wall of gray shale looming over his left shoulder. The arrow's heavy, broadleaf head skipped off the rock with a strike of sparks. Splinters showered the side of his face.

The shout from behind, in a language nasal and flat, sounded closer. Too close.

A fresh fall of rock, calved from one of the many overhangs, piled up on the trail ahead. A true Cimmerian would hardly have questioned any need to climb a sheer cliff face or slippery clay shelf most days. But with a pack of four . . . five Vanir jackals racing up after him, the head-high slide might as well have been a fortress wall.

Kern's growl of anger died in his throat. His muscles ached from this Crom-cursed uphill sprint, but still he gathered himself and leaped up the side of the pile, hands reaching and grasping, feet churning as he powered his way up the fall and halfway over the top, where he risked a single glance back.

Five. Five invaders who raced up on his trail, giving chase after discovering the raider campsite Kern and his small band of warriors had attacked—butchered—that morning before the springtime sun even peeked over the Teeth. All but one raider had the flaming-red hair so common among Vanir. The other was more of a reddish gold, telling of Aesir blood somewhere in his past, curly and hacked short over the shoulders. To a man they wore the heavy, leather skirts preferred in the north's deep mountains and wastelands. And boiled-leather cuirasses banded or studded with metal. Bracers and greaves. Helms decorated with the horns of many different beasts.

All of them wrapped up in their own furious bloodlust.

All with large swords strapped over their backs or sheathed at their sides. Broadswords. War swords. None kept a naked blade in hand, but they could draw them fast enough if he slipped too close.

Two raiders also held Vanir war bows, and that was bad. Hard to outrun an arrow. One of the raiders nocked a new shaft and drew back, sighting along the polished ashwood. He let fly with a smooth release and a thrumming bowstring.

Kern threw himself over the far side of the rock fall, ducking beneath the whistle. He half climbed, half slid down the pile, rocks scraping his arms and gouging at his chest through a tattered leather jerkin. Rough edges of frozen slush cut at his face as he collapsed into a rough pile at the bottom of the fall.

“Ymirish!” one of the pursuing raiders shouted after Kern. And a long string of guttural curses that turned their name for a Vanaheim war leader—one of Grimmir’s faithful—into a mockery.

And that was exactly what Kern was to them. A savage mockery. Sharing northern blood just as certainly as he shared the appearance of a true Ymirish—a “Son of Ymir.” The dead-frost color of his long hair, so strange to Cimmeria and Vanaheim both, and the feral, golden eyes of a wolf. It was an appearance many raiders had been taught to fear. Yet they would see him dead all the same.

Him, and any Cimmerian who dared follow him.

Untangling his legs from around a stunted bellberry bush, Kern picked himself up and checked the short sword at his side with a quick slap. Part of him wanted to draw the blade, charge back into the teeth of his attackers. Tired of running. Angered at being hunted. But he pulled his feet beneath him and raced onward, gaining the next turn without trouble as the northerners clambered up the rockslide behind him. A shelf peeked out above him, over a muddy bank. Child’s play. Leaping from foothold to foothold he got above the broken path, onto the shoulder of the ridgeline.

And there, squatting over a thin layer of melting snow, Kern picked up a large rock big as his own head. He raised it high in the air. Waited for the first raider to make that last dogleg.

Crouched in the ridge’s shadow, facing into a northerly breeze that still held a last touch of winter, Kern shivered. Cold. Forever cold. Exertion taxed his body but did not warm him.

A trickle of sweat sluiced down from his brow, running into the corner of his right eye, burning. His labored breathing sounded heavily in his own ears, all but drowning out snatches of distant birdsong, the grunts of nearby exertion, and the grinding clacks of rock against rock. Then the stomps of boots against the lower path.

More shouts. The sound of swords—more than one—rasping free of metal-clad sheaths. A glimpse of white horn, metal, and a red fall of hair.

With a savage grunt Kern heaved the rock down with all his strength. It glanced off a ledge of gray shale, then slammed into the side of one Vanir’s face where his helm stopped just above a high cheekbone. The impact knocked the raider back, stumbling him from the narrow trail. With a bellowing yell the raider plummeted over the edge, screaming a short-lived curse cut short as he smashed into a spread of boulders several lengths below.

Four.

He took his victories where he found them.

Before one of the Vanir archers swung around with a readied arrow, he abandoned his perch for an all-out run along the ridge shoulder. Pumping his arms. Finding the best footing by instinct more than anything else.

Kicking through the last vestiges of the long winter’s blanket, he sprayed a gray sheet of wet snow and muddied slush between each stride as he struggled up onto the exposed ridgeline. There the sun found him, still low on the horizon but already spreading warming rays over the knife-edged hills. The Breaknecks. A fitting name for the rough land spread between Clan Conarch’s northwestern territory and the lower Eiglophian Mountains, full of canyons and clefts and jutting escarpments.

A narrow crevice split the ridgeline, but he easily jumped it. Stumbled forward. Picked up speed again as his fists and legs pumped and lungs struggled for more air as he ran.

Racing up onto a dead-end drop.

Steep falls on three sides. Patches of thorny brush ringing a small, circular landing, then out over several lengths of open air the tops of some tall pine and redwood cedar. From there he looked out over the tops of a thin forest, or back along the narrow ridgeline with four Vanir raiders running up behind him.

Kern did not hesitate. Running between two clumps of the thorny, deadwood brush, he leaped out over the deadly fall, arms and legs flailing, eyes squinted nearly shut and with a blood-hammering yell . . .

. . . to smash into the upper branches of a tall pine.

Grabbing hold of the narrow trunk with frantic strength, Kern saved himself a long, bone-crushing fall through the tree. As it was, the evergreen's top bent far over, dangling him above the ground at a dizzying height. Then . . . slowly . . . it straightened enough for him to hook his feet into lower branches.

Surrounded by the sharp scent of the evergreen, Kern managed to climb a few lengths down the pitch-sticky tree before the Vanir invaders crashed through the same break in the thorny brush he had, hauled themselves in, and spread to a short line across the edge of the cliff. Then he waited. Holding on. Barely protected by the narrow trunk and a few thin, needle-covered branches. Watching as the raiders glared and grinned.

One brayed a short laugh at his expense.

Heavy gusts of chill, northern winds whipped at their hair, their cloaks. Two pulled new arrows from leather quivers. Nocked them into their war bows. The others didn't even bother to draw swords.

Easy meat.

For Kern's warriors.

Like trapping spiders, springing from camouflage to snare their prey with long, hooklike legs, five men suddenly erupted from beneath the dry-stick brush behind the Vanir. Kern watched as Reave and Daol threw off their blankets first, shaking themselves free of a light covering of dirt and rock, kicking aside the thorny brush they had carefully stuck in the ground to deter the raiders from walking over the top of them. Ossian, as well. Then Garret and Aodh.

Reave held his greatsword across his massive chest like a staff, left hand carefully gripping the edged blade as he shoved the nearest archer forward. Daol, never quite as physical, used a short javelin. He took his man in the back, ramming the steel tip out through the Vanir's broad chest, then kicked him forward, off the spear.

Both raiders screamed as they fell.

Aodh and Garret Blackpatch were both older men, over forty summers, but warriors still. And they had the advantage of teamwork. Seizing the second archer between them, they simply yanked him around awkwardly, shaking him like camp dogs on a rat, then threw the raider far out over the drop. Nearly far enough to catch a tree, as Kern had done. But not quite. He smashed violently through a few lower branches before his cries were ended by a meaty thud.

Ossian was the only one to run into trouble. One of the warriors Kern had picked up from the village clan of Taur, he was always easy to pick out of a group. He scraped his head bald almost every day and trimmed his facial growth into a goat's beard as had his father, the Taurin chieftain. One of Kern's best men, usually, this time he moved too slow or his victim too quick. The Vanir warrior turned and grappled with Ossian, getting one hand curled into Ossian's beard while the other seized a handful of wool cloak. Together, they

wrestled for several long heartbeats, twisting too quickly for Daol to thrust home with the javelin.

Then Ossian simply made a decision of his own and drove forward, throwing both himself and the Vanir off the cliff.

Kern's heart leaped up into his throat, even knowing the precautions his warriors were supposed to have taken in laying the ambush. Five to one odds—there had been better ways. Saner ways.

But it was hard to argue with results. Both warriors fell in a flailing embrace, with Ossian trailing a length of stout rope anchored into the ground up top. The line snapped taut after only four lengths, raking the loop of braided line up beneath Ossian's armpits and bringing him to a sudden halt. The raider jerked once, hard, then broke loose from the other man's grasp with a tearing sound.

Kern winced. He hoped the tearing had been the cloak. Not the beard.

Ossian slammed back against the side of the cliff. The raider made the same, short trip his brethren had made, and with the same ending: a weighted thud, then a final, heavy silence.

"Kern?" Daol stood at the edge of the bluff, hanging dangerously over the drop. Rope notwithstanding. "You all right?"

Ossian dangled and twisted at the end of his anchor line, bumping against the rock wall.

"We're fine," he yelled up the cliff face. "Yea and all's good down here!"

Kern raised one hand from the sticky tree trunk, gave a weak wave.

"We'll meet you down below," Daol shouted.

The others busied themselves gathering up coils of rope and blankets, leather sacks, and their bedroll slings. Everything went over the cliff, thrown down below where the warriors could pick it up without having to pack it down themselves. Several packs came close to hitting Ossian on the way down.

"Ho! Watch out!"

"If you come across Ossian's body, make sure you drag it over where that wolf of yours won't start gnawing at it."

Another wave.

"What? What do you—Nay! Daol? Aodh?" Nothing. "Reave?"

After little sleep and a morning full of death, there was no raucous uproar. But Kern heard more than one person barking a few sharp laughs at Ossian's expense. Reave alone could have hauled the fallen clansman back to the top of the cliff, but instead they left him twisting around at the end of the rope, craning his neck to stare back up the sheer climb.

"Reave!"

Kern watched the others head back down the ridge's spine. Then shifted more weight to his shoulders as he relaxed the grip his feet had against the pine's trunk. Sliding down, bending slender branches aside as he caught for the larger ones that might support some actual weight, he worked his way slowly, carefully, toward the ground.

Daol had the right of it. There was no hurry.

"REAVE!"

Hundreds of green needles matted Kern's wild mane of frost blond hair. Stuck to his face and arms. Itching down his back, behind his greaves, and beneath his simple, brown kilt of rough wool.

Pine pitch coated his hands, staining his palms with yellow-brown patches and smelling of evergreen. He learned quickly not to pick the needles from his tangled strands unless he wanted a more painful mess. Instead, he scraped up some dry dirt from beneath a large stone and rubbed it over his hands and legs. The dry dirt soaked up the pitch. It made the stains worse, but stopped his skin from sticking to everything. Searching at a rough-faced rock the size of his fist, he went to work on each hand, grinding and scraping, wearing away the worst of the stains.

By then the others—except for Ossian—had made it down from the ridge.

Aodh and Reave came dragging in the fifth Vanir between them, the one Kern had knocked from the narrow path. They dropped him next to the battered bodies of the others.

“Not a bad catch,” Garret Blackpatch said. A rare compliment from the taciturn, older man.

“Three afore sun's rise.” Aodh shook his head. “Crom's stiff pike, would have been fine at that.”

A busy morning, any way one looked at it. The kind of hard-press fighting that made them all feel the loss of their missing friends, left behind in Callaugh Glen to heal or to help protect their wounded. And a couple to assist Ros-Crana in stirring up the western clans.

If that could be done at all.

Discussions best saved for later. With only the short handful of them present, everyone quickly settled into their routine. Daol had already scouted out a good site, where the spring sun peeked over a natural hedge of basket cedar to ease the morning chill from a small clearing. Then he ran off with his hunting bow, gray eyes alert for prey, and predators. Reave and Aodh found and stripped the bodies of the Vanir. They piled bedrolls, armor, and weapons, and a large amount of miscellaneous gear in front of Garret, who examined the pile for the best pieces to carry south. With Wallach Graybeard missing, still recovering from the loss of his hand in the recent fighting, Garret had the best eye for quality. His left, as it happened to be.

Garret Blackpatch was fortunate to have his remaining eye at all after tangling with Grimmir's saber-toothed cats. Three weeks after the fact, the three angry stripes torn down the right side of his face were still crusted over with scabs and a bit red around the edges. The ruined socket hid behind a packing of boiled cloth and a wide, black, leather patch. For his part, Kern staked small spears of beef next to a small pit ringed with blocky pieces of shale. It took him almost as much time to start the small campfire with flint and steel as it did for Ossian to find handholds, scale back up the cliff face, and run himself off the escarpment. The flames ate up soft tinder and crackled into a spread of dry, brown pine needles. They were licking along the first few sticks of deadwood when the Taurin warrior stomped into camp, brushing past Kern.

“No blades,” Kern warned.

Ossian grunted and pushed by after the others.

Reave and Aodh crouched down near Garret, their backs toward the building fire as they examined a shaggy, gray blanket of mountain ram fur. Oblivious. Discussing who had the better claim with a minimum of shoving. Reave had size between the two men, and with

his black, brushy beard and coarse hair was a fairly shaggy beast himself. But Aodh, even with salt-and-pepper hair telling his age, was nobody's victim. So they argued.

Garret, on the other side of the two, facing back toward Kern and Ossian, saw the other warrior coming. Kern noticed the exaggerated widening around his left eye and the hint of a mischievous gleam in their cold, blue depths. But Garret said nothing, dropping his gaze. Letting Ossian approach, tap Reave on the shoulder, and, when the large man looked around, slug him right in the jaw.

Leave it to Ossian to go right after the biggest opponent first.

With a shout Aodh rose from the ground, putting his shoulder into Ossian's gut and driving the other man backward. Hard. They staggered through Kern's fire pit, stuffing out the flames under Aodh's leather boot.

Kern rocked back, away from the small explosion of acrid smoke and sparks, watching as the two wrestled back and forth, kicking apart his circle of stones, knocking over the spears of meat. Neither man with a clear advantage. Then Ossian doubled his hands together into one huge fist, and brought it down on the back of Aodh's neck.

Aodh sagged to his knees, then splayed out over the ground on the next stunning blow. But with a roar of savage delight, Reave waded back into the fight. He caught up Ossian from behind in a great bear hug, trapping the man's arms at his side and lifting him bodily from the ground.

Ossian's feet lashed back in mule kicks, beating at Reave's muscular thighs, searching for the groin. But Reave was too canny a fighter. He turned his hips away, then, with a twisting throw, hurled Ossian in a spinning fall that smashed him into the ground and rolled him into a heap back near Garret Blackpatch.

He lay there a moment, too stunned to pick himself up, while Aodh shook his own head clear and Reave spit out some blood and rubbed at his bruised jaw. Then Ossian flopped himself onto his back and bellowed a great, full-chested laugh at the blue sky overhead. Reave chuckled and Aodh, still on hands and knees, beat a fist at the ground, too dizzy to laugh but joining in as he could. Garret smiled thinly, then winced. His ruined eye pained him worse on bright days, for some reason. The shaman had said it would be because his left was now working twice as hard.

"Did I miss something?"

Daol strolled back into the clearing, his bow in one hand and a pair of pheasant held by the feet in the other. He dropped the scrawny birds on the ground next to Kern. Eighteen summers and still filling into his manhood, there was no better hunter Kern had ever met than Daol. And if there was ever a better tracker, it could only be Daol's father, Hydallan. The younger man also knew very well what had happened. His air of innocence was laid on just a bit too thick.

"An argument," Kern said, encouraging the fire back to life. He nodded at the birds.

"That was fast."

"Hunting is good up here."

It was. For all kinds of prey.

Spring's return had been very late, the winter-of-no-end threatening Cimmerian clans with starvation as well as their facing the usual raids mounted by northern invaders. Kern recalled how close their home village of Gaud had come to ruin. Scraping the bottom of the food pits. Their new chieftain, Cul, encouraging the old and the weak to offer up their own lives so that the village, the clan, would endure. Such a waste.

But with the sun's return, and the snowmelt, game was plentiful and very active as animals made up for lost months. Some said it was the recent defeat of Grinnir's army that finally ended the long freeze. Most scoffed, but Kern was not so certain anymore. Cimmerians were not usually so superstitious, but how could the question not be raised in the minds of those who had witnessed the unnatural powers of Grinnir's sorcerers? And for those who had seen Grinnir himself.

Kern had done both. He had stood in the great warrior's shadow, wrestling atop the plateau that overlooked Clan Conarch. Giant-kin! Large and ferocious, with a thick hide the color of ancient, rotten snow. Thick muscles cording his body, and a toothy face twisted into a snarl of rage. So clear, the blood of frost giants, but still not a beast. Intelligence had warred with smoldering fury inside those great, golden eyes. Kern had seen them up close. Had looked into the eyes Grinnir shared with his Ymirish.

With Kern.

"Yea," Reave said, agreeing with Daol. He wiped a spot of blood from his lip with the back of his hand. "Hunting good all over. Too good, by Crom."

The large man reached up and ran a finger along his left ear, against the half dozen earrings he had taken off men he'd killed. His right ear held only a single gold hoop—his first trophy, taken from a Vanir raider the year before. Winter, and now spring, had made for busy months.

Aodh shrugged, rising onto unsteady feet. "What can we do? The snowmelt makes for easier travel down out of the Eiglophians. Opens up the passes between the Nordheim lands and Cimmeria." In the last few weeks, especially, raiders had swept across the northern border in a renewed plague. A renewed threat. "The Breaknecks nay so remote anymore."

And if the rest of Kern's small band—his pack of wolves—were going to have made any progress with the local clans, it would be done now. He poked at the budding fire with a thin stick, stirring it, then held his hand down near the flames. As usual he felt the touch of heat on his skin, but not down deep. Not even spring could thaw the touch of winter permanently settled into Kern's bones. A reminder, as if he needed another, that he was not fully of Cimmeria. That he did not belong.

A spark of anger stirred inside him again. He was stalling again. He knew it. Picking up the fallen meat, he brushed away bits of grass and dirt, then adjusted the spears over the fire. This day had been coming, and it was both too soon and not late enough.

"We move south," he said at last. They had all talked around the subject for too many days, trying to draw Kern out. His silence was at an end. "To Conarch. And Callaugh. We find the others, and we do what needs doing."

"Back home?" Ossian asked. He still lay flat on his back, a trickle of blood leaking along his chin from a split lip.

"Along the way." Kern nodded warily. His people were all outcasts, and once outside the clan, always outside. It was custom that carried the weight of law in Cimmeria. There would be those not happy to see them. "But we also swore to take the bloody spear to other clans. Other parts of Cimmeria."

That had been his pledge at the end of the battle, discovering himself and his warriors still alive, and Grinnir fled with the core of the northern war host. But that was also before. Before Sláine Longtooth and T'hule Chieftain of Clan Conarch began a new feud. Before Kern learned also that several of his warriors needed weeks to recover from their injuries.

Before Ros-Crana of Clan Callaugh asked him to wait, and to disappear for a time. To give her a chance to forge alliances without Kern's presence to disturb other chieftains. But enough was enough.

"We move south," Kern said again. The spark of anger flared into a small flame, his mind set. "Anyone have something they want to say?"

No one spoke for a moment. Crouched or standing under the cool, spring sun. Listening to the fire crackle at fresh wood. Measuring themselves for what was about to come.

Something harder, in a way, than facing death at the hands of Vanir raiders.

"Yea," Ossian finally said. He rolled over into a crouch, looked to Kern, the others, then snagged the nearby blanket of shaggy fur, which had been left in a pile next to Garret Blackpatch. "This," he said, "is mine." And dabbed the corner of the blanket against his mouth, against his split lip.

No one argued.