

1

ALTHOUGH FAR SOUTHWEST of Aquilonia's capital, Tarantia, and, in fact, poised on the very border of the realm and that of neighboring Zingara, the province of Poitain was an ardent supporter of its king, Conan. The heavily armored knights of Poitain were renowned for their fighting prowess and had often come to their liege's aid even when most others had turned their backs against him.

The chief reason for their almost zealous support for the Cimmerian-born ruler of Aquilonia lay with two men: Count Trocero—lord of the land—and his senior knight, Sir Prospero. Both the count and Sir Prospero were deeply devoted comrades of the king, and the latter, especially, spent much time in the company of Conan. Prospero was, in fact, in Tarantia almost as much as he was in his own province.

But not this day. Accompanied by four trusted men, the senior knight rode through the countryside of Poitain near the blue-tinted mountains of the northeast. Ostensibly, he and his companions were on their way to visit his cousin at the tower at Serenti Pass, one of the many towers and castles along the mountains built during the days when Poitain had been independent and Aquilonia only a small plot of land surrounding

old Tamar—the original name for Tarantia and one still used often in Prospero’s homeland.

Sir Prospero himself was the epitome of Poitainian chivalry and knighthood. A tall, lithe man in full, gold-chased armor, the dark-eyed noble was skilled in many weapons, but especially the great, two-handed swords for which his kind were known. Prospero’s own, jewel-encrusted blade hung in a massive scabbard attached to his back. Unlike his companions, he did not wear his visored helm, but had it loosely hooked to his saddle. This allowed his long, golden blond hair to flow freely. Like most Poitainians, Prospero’s skin was bronzed from the sun. He had a handsome, almost roguish—albeit clean-shaven—face and, as was often the case, wore a grin. That same grin could generally be seen in battle, just as the knight was about to down a foe.

Most of this part of Poitain consisted of lush plains dotted by forest. Prospero much preferred the palm trees and olive groves of the southern half of the province, for there the women were as warm and welcoming as the climate. However, duty to the count and the king brought him up here this day. Secret reports had come of a possible Zingaran scout infiltrating the mountainous region. Count Trocero did not take much stock in the reports, but it was better to be safe than sorry, as the saying went. Since he did not want to alarm his subjects unduly, he had asked the knight to take a look. As this was near where Prospero’s cousin was stationed, it made for the perfect excuse.

Prospero’s growing opinion of the matter was that the rumor was just that . . . a rumor. Cautious questioning of the local nobility had unearthed nothing more than a Zingaran coin and blade recently discovered. One look at the coin in question—the monarch whose face lay emblazoned on one side dead a century past—and the rusted condition of the sword was enough to convince Prospero that the ones who had reported the “scout” were seeing ghosts of their own imagination. Both items were clearly relics of one of the southern kingdom’s long-ago failed attempts to make Poitain’s fertile lands its own.

Still, Prospero would have been remiss had he not fulfilled his duties to the letter. By the time the knight returned to Count Trocero, the rumor would be absolutely laid to rest.

The four guards with him were handpicked men all, trusted with his life just as they trusted him with theirs. Like him, they were Poitainians by birth and upbringing. Aquilonia kept its own contingent of soldiers in the province, but while Prospero respected them, they were certainly not *Poitainians*. Even the king would have readily agreed with him on that.

The sun was already low in the sky, and some dark clouds threatened to obscure what remained of the light. The landscape had grown rockier, with hills rising up ahead of the party. The tower maintained by Prospero's cousin was another two days away, but there was a garrison outpost barely some three hours ahead where the senior knight and his companions would stop.

"I see dust up ahead," one of the other knights abruptly remarked.

Prospero could think of no one who would be out in this area, but as it was northeastern Poitain, he did not grow overly concerned. It would hardly be a regiment of mounted Zingarans . . .

And, in fact, when he saw that it was only two riders approaching, even his slight concerns melted away. They were certainly no threat.

The pair were clad in dust-laden travel cloaks. The hoods covered their heads well, entirely obscuring their identities. As the pair reined their horses to a halt, the apparent leader raised a hand in greeting, and rumbled, "You would be Sir Prospero?"

"That I am," remarked the knight with a nod. Ever polite, he saluted the other man. Prospero leaned forward, seeking a glimpse of the fellow. It was one thing to remain hooded while riding, another when conversing with someone. "And who would you be, with your covered countenance, who seeks me?"

This brought a chuckle from the shadowed face. The rider's hand suddenly dropped to the sword at his side. "Ha! I'd be none other than your *doom*, fool!"

And as he drew his weapon, he whistled.

The hills around the knights blossomed with armed figures, at least two dozen by Prospero's trained eye. They were clad like their cohorts, with some mounted and others on foot. They swarmed the small party from all sides, their murderous intent very clear.

All this, Sir Prospero saw in but a single moment. Then, his veteran hand moved like the wind, seizing and drawing his own well-honed blade. Gripping it in both hands, he then let out a battle cry and met the two men before him.

The sword of the leader met his . . . and shattered under the force of Prospero's mighty blow. The hooded rider barely escaped having his shoulder and neck separated.

His companion was not so fortunate. Perhaps eager to claim the kill that his leader had lost, he thrust at Prospero while the knight was in the downswing. For many less-skilled fighters, the attack would have been impossible to defend against. Not so Count Trocero's most trusted man; Prospero adjusted the course of his two-handed sword, using its momentum to assist him in raising it up again.

The large blade caught the attacker's underneath, ripping the latter free. As his adversary's sword went flying, Prospero once more used momentum—this time in a downward swing—to cut open the miscreant's chest and send the hapless fool's innards spilling over the startled horse.

He was somewhat surprised at the man's inept fighting, but did not question the good fortune. For the moment unhindered by any foe, Prospero checked on the others. The harsh clang of metal against metal was proof enough that Prospero's comrades had reacted nearly as swiftly as he had, but by no means did the knight feel any overconfidence. He and his order were exceptionally skilled—Prospero felt no vanity in thinking so—but they faced great numbers even for Poitainians.

While the leader withdrew to find another weapon, three more of his minions came at the senior knight. They struck from his left and his right with a constant and well-coordinated

barrage, yet, did not press him as much as Prospero would have supposed.

But if Prospero's luck seemed good, the same could not be said for those with him. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Sir Oswal, most trusted of his comrades, suddenly caught by a base blow to the back of his neck. With a groan, the Poitainian fell forward. Yet, even in dying, Oswal did as Prospero hoped *he* would should death claim him; the other knight used his fall to thrust the point of his weapon through one of the other assassins, skewering the man and dragging him to the ground with the dying Poitainian.

Even as Sir Oswal fell, Prospero dealt expertly with his own foes. With sweeping swings, he forced the men at each side back. His huge warhorse rose up on its hind legs, kicking out at another animal. The heavy hooves struck a black stallion ridden by one assassin, knocking both man and steed over.

Then, from nowhere, one of those on foot charged up and lanced Prospero's horse in the ribs. The mighty steed cried out and twisted to the side. Prospero fought to retain both his sword and his balance.

The badly wounded horse broke through the gauntlet of steel. It carried its rider along, heedless of his attempts to regain control. The knight did not fear for himself, but what his loss to the others would mean. With at least one man down, the others would be more harried than ever.

But Prospero's mount cared not a whit for his concerns. The beast, its side now covered in its own blood, staggered through the hill region. Behind him, the Poitainian heard angry shouts. He had no doubt that pursuit was right behind him.

The horse stumbled badly. Sensing what would happen next, Prospero threw himself from the saddle.

A moment later, the animal collapsed. It tumbled on its side, and had Count Trocero's man still been astride, he would have lost his leg for certain.

As it was, Prospero landed in an unregal heap a short distance from his dying steed. His sword went flying from his grip. It clattered among the rocks, then vanished down a gap.

Cursing, the harried knight reached for the dagger he always wore in a sheath at his belt. Six of the riders came into sight, followed a moment later by the leader of the murderous band.

“Up there!” snarled the latter. “Around those rocks! Leave him no path out!”

That so many could be spent on him boded ill concerning his comrades. Prospero was a man of with a light heart around his friends but could be terrible and unrelenting around his enemies. These villains had likely slain the others and no doubt meant harm to more than just himself. While he drew a breath, he would not permit that.

As one of the cloaked figures climbed up near him, Prospero threw himself down upon the man. His adversary gaped as the knight filled his view; clad in full armor, Prospero was a stunning missile.

He collided with his attacker, bowling him over like a human battering ram. The cloaked assassin fell back, plummeting off the hillside. Prospero, with expert reflexes long trained to compensate for the heavy plate covering him, snared an outcropping. His legs dangled momentarily before the Poitainian managed to pull himself up again.

But although he had succeeded in slaying the one assailant, there were still far too many, and they learned quickly from the death of their companion. Those directly below halted where they were, keeping out of range of any second leap. The others continued their climb, maneuvering around like hungry spiders toward a trapped, wingless fly.

There remained only the last vestiges of day. Prospero considered his chances in the dark. The moon would be more than half-full. His opponents were clad in garments more suited not only for mobility but for blending into the night. He, on the other hand, would shine like a beacon in his gold-chased suit.

As he considered his best chances, Prospero noted the leader moving up with the rest. Trying to buy time, the Poitainian brandished his dagger toward the figure, then called out, “Who are you? Why are you doing this?”

Although the hood and the shadows of the fading day continued to hide the man's features, Prospero could not help but sense the grim smile.

"Because it is well past time," remarked the leader almost matter-of-factly. "Because we will not wait any longer . . ."

"Wait . . . for what?"

"For the passing of Aquilonia."

There was a clatter of rock from above Prospero's left. The knight glanced up and saw that somehow his adversaries had managed to get above him. He could only surmise that some had taken a different path from those above, then climbed down.

They had him surrounded.

Prospero edged to his right even though he knew that they expected him to do just that. He gripped the dagger tight, ready to use it on the first viable target. The plate armor would have made it impossible for many men even to attempt to crawl along the high hillside. Even for Prospero, the task proved daunting.

But the king had to be warned. *Conan* had to be warned.

There was another clatter of rock . . . directly above the Poitainian.

Prospero looked up.

Two cloaked figures leapt down on him—