

AGE OF CONAN: SONGS OF VICTORY: Legends of Kern, Volume 3

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From Ace Books 0-441-01310-4

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Morning arrived with a pregnant stillness hushing Murrogh Forest. Birdsong, and the lowing of cattle that should already have been set out on their early-morning graze, were replaced by the long, slow scraping sound of stone against metal. A dry rasp—honing along one edge of a broadsword, tapering off with a fast, harsh file. Then again. Drawing out each moment with the same rough whisper.

Schhh-nhik.

Kern Wolf-Eye tightened one hand over the hilt of his short sword, still sheathed at his side, and stepped out from behind the short fence of saplings he'd braced up by a single pole. Overhead, gray clouds pulled a thick blanket across the sky, reducing dawn's light to gloom and shadows. He eyed the overcast warily. Not heavy enough yet for a serious rain, he gauged. Another day of gray spring showers.

His long, frost blond hair, plastered down by an earlier drizzle, hung in tangled, twisted braids against the side of his head. He wore a chain-mail vest of tarnished rings, bracers, and a silver armlet on each of his bare arms.

Gooseflesh stood out on both arms as well, and the hairs on the back of his neck prickled. Neither of which had anything to do with the wet or the cold.

Standing on one of the narrow paths that crossed the slopes below Gorram Village, Kern looked out over the forest. What he could see of it. A thick, low-lying fog tangled its way among pine and thick birch and drooping cedars, hiding the lower trails. The fog moved as if alive, roiling through thick branches. Breathing. Pushing up against the lower slopes as if rallying its strength for the short, sharp climb. The covering blanket piled up only a stone's toss below the village's first rock wall, behind which crouched a half dozen armed men with swords already standing naked in their hands. Ready. Waiting.

Soon, he knew. There was something out there. A scent, like cold steel, and the metallic taste of blood burning at the back of his throat.

Schhh-nhik.

A few sharp glances shot his way. Warriors he didn't recognize, for the most part, hunkered down behind boulders or small piles of rock, or another of the wooden fences hastily built and propped up to shield a man. Or woman. Who waited, same as he did, for what would come. Clansfolk who were shorter than the average Cimmerian. Stockier. With brown eyes and strong, square jaws.

Eastern folk.

Only one of Kern's "wolves" crouched nearby. Aodh. Kneeling at the base of a small rock wall, sitting back on his calves. Lean and muscular from a hard winter's running and fighting. A veteran warrior of better than forty summers, only the salt-and-pepper hair he kept tightly shorn and the extra gray sneaking into a thick, drooping moustache told his age.

Broadsword laid out flat across his lap, Aodh held a whetstone clutched in his right hand. He drew the stone down the length of his blade, stropping the edge with long, even pulls, blue eyes never once leaving his work.

Schhh-nhik.

Kern ignored a nearby hiss of annoyance from one of Gorram's warriors, just as he left Aodh to his own deliberate preparations. The calm and the quiet before battle got at everyone, sooner or later. He trusted each man and woman to see after themselves. The village was, after all, as readied as they could make it in the short time they'd had. Rock walls repaired. Brush that might have offered an easy handhold on the way up the hillside cleared. Kern's warriors had cut saplings by the hundreds, thinning the local forest, sharpening their tops to make rough-hewn spears that were anchored into the hillside, the sharpened points angled back down the slope, thrusting into the face of any attacker who might try to climb for the village.

Two dozen huts. A slaughter pit. A couple of lean-tos. Gorram Village was about as small as they came, though the chieftain of Clan Murrogh had promised it to be wealthy in cattle and strong arms. Kern hadn't believed it, coming upon the hillside village the day before. No room for oat crops. Poor grazing land. But the Gorram had surprised him, turning out forty well-armed warriors and (later) showing him nearly two dozen cattle penned back inside a cleft in the hill. The lands of eastern Cimmeria were constantly showing Kern a new face.

Such as the one that suddenly popped above another rock wall, nearly at Kern's left shoulder.

The boy wore a sleeveless jerkin and a simple brown kilt. Curly locks of honey-brown hair framed a round face still pudgy with youth. A dark smear of dirt covered one side of the lad's nose and half of one cheek as well. Gangly arms, Kern saw, and slender hands not yet built for a sword. Twelve summers, if a day.

Biting back a curse, Kern shoved his half-drawn blade back into its sheath. He rubbed a hand over his face, feeling fresh stubble scratch against his palm.

"Bad idea, boy, sneaking up on a man." He gave the child an angry glare, satisfied when the lad jumped back as if bitten.

"Truth," the boy whispered, his voice raw and full of wonder. "You do have the wolf eyes. The other boys, they said it was all made up."

So much for satisfaction.

Kern felt something inside him darken, like a door closing on a windowless room, and a warm thrill of anger he quickly smothered under a cold, dark blanket. It was always there, the rage—the power—lurking in the back of his mind. It tempted him at every turn, if he'd only look inward and embrace it.

And naturally the boy had hit upon the core of Kern's troubled past. One merely had to glance in his direction. The Gorram might not all fit the usual look of the Cimmerian, a people who ran toward hair dark like coal and blue eyes the color of a summer sky, but in comparison to Kern they were Crom's nearest kin. Kern's frost blond hair and waxy skin would have pegged him as an outsider no matter what. But his golden eyes, sharing a wolf's feral gaze, were what everyone remembered, and so many feared.

Just a boy, he reminded himself. "Why aren't you locked in a room?"

"Climbed out the window. Wanted to see for meself."

"Now you have. So get back to your hut."

The boy raised himself over the wall on those skinny arms. "Gonna make me?"

A touch of defiance that Kern remembered well. He'd had it, certainly, growing up in Gaud. Maybe a bit stronger than most, as an outsider even within his own clan. It wasn't a completely unhappy memory. And a bit better than most, these days.

So rather than argue, or make trouble among the Gorram by chasing the boy back up the hill, Kern shrugged. He started to turn away, paused, and pulled a long dagger from the scabbard tied into his wide, leather belt. He tossed the blade to the sandy-haired youth. "Going to be outside, be armed."

The boy stared at the dagger, then at Kern. "Father forbids me to fight yet."

Kern did not bother pointing out that the lad's father had likely forbidden him from peeking a nose out of the hut and turned his attention back to the shroud of fog as a dark flash tickled at the back of his mind. "If our enemy makes it this far, what your father forbids won't matter so much, boy."

The youth weighed the dagger in an open palm. "Mayhap they won't come." He sounded disappointed.

But Kern knew better. The short hairs on the back of his neck stood up, bristling.

"They are already here," he said, then ducked back behind the nearby wooden fence as an arrow slashed up from the fog, shattering against the rock wall just below the boy's face. "Raiders!"

Several voices raised the call of alarm, all shouting at once. More arrows whistled out of the morning's cover. Dark shadows down inside the fog resolved into men who moved, loosed a new flight, and scrambled forward again while reaching for another shaft.

A second arrow struck the wooden fence Kern Wolf-Eye hid behind. It shook the rickety shield with a hammerlike blow, the tip forcing its way through a thin crack between two saplings. Then a third and a fourth shaft slashed by to shatter against the rock wall as the lad's eyes went wide with fear and excitement.

"Get your fool head down!" Kern grabbed up a stone and chucked it at the boy's head. It clipped an ear and finally convinced the youth that he'd be better off hiding behind the rock wall.

Nearby, Aodh crabbed out from behind his pile of stones, then rolled back into cover as a new flight buried itself in the ground where he'd lain. He flashed Kern a handful of fingers. Two, three . . . four times.

Twenty. Twenty raiders would never have been enough to take Gorram Village, even before Kern's warriors arrived to help them prepare for any siege. Twenty raiders might have caused trouble. Killed a few men. Stolen some cattle if they'd kept surprise on their side. Against the entire village, armed and prepared, they had no chance. They simply did not realize it yet.

Kern's "men of the wolves" planned to show them their folly. Any moment now.

He guessed fairly close. Slipping out from behind his small fence, Kern snatched up his shield, which lay in the mud nearby, and readied himself. Glancing around one of the shield's edges, he saw that the first few shadows had nearly reached the lowest rock wall. Vanir!

So easy to tell, with their fire-red hair and the helms they decorated with the horns of different beasts. They charged up out of the fog, ignoring the switchback cattle paths. Warriors with blades and shields readied scrambled up the mud-slick slopes, while archers with their heavy war bows covered from behind. They yelled full-throated battle cries, and Kern heard more than one maddened voice spitting out a curse of "Ymir-egh." Cursed of Ymir.

These raiders had come for him. Sparks of anger jumped behind Kern's eyes, stinging at the forefront of his mind.

Soon.

Somewhere, still lost under the cover of the fog, a horn bellowed out their war call with a long, mournful blast. Driving the Vanir forward. Kern needed no such instrument. His men knew their task. Had honed it to a skill in their several months of living, fighting, and bleeding together on battlefields ranging from Conall Valley through the Broken Leg Lands and over the eastern passes of the Black Mountains.

Almost . . . now!

Like rock scorpions striking from ambush, four men, hunkered down behind cover one level below Kern, suddenly rose with bows. They fired down at the charging Vanir, slamming arrows into their upraised shields, slowing the charge. Then a second volley after the first.

One arrow slipped past and buried a broadleaf head into a raider's shoulder. It spun the man around, unbalancing him on the treacherous footing. He slipped, fell, and rolled back down the hillside until he slammed against an outcropping of boulders.

His shout of pain was cut short as his head cracked against a sharp edge of stone.

Despite the late-held volleys, two of the flame-haired northerners managed to get a hand on the lowest wall, straining to pull themselves up. One reeled away with a shriek of pain as a sword flashed out from behind that wall to come hacking down across his wrist, severing his hand.

As blood pumped out in hot splashes from the waving stump, Desagrena rose from hiding. Kern recognized her lithe form and quick movements, even from behind. She skewered her broadsword through the man's chest once . . . twice . . . and he fell back, already dead before he hit the ground.

The second raider fared little better. Managing to roll over the rock wall, gaining temporary ground on the path it had sheltered, she found herself staring up at one of the largest Cimmerians she'd likely ever see.

Reave had the strength and size of a black bear, and with his coarse, brushy beard was not too far different in appearance. He wielded a Cimmerian greatsword, an impressive length of edged steel, which he slashed overhead to cleave down through the raider's shoulder and chest. Left her bloodied and broken on the trail.

Three attackers down already. Kern still had four warriors crouched behind that lower wall who had yet to show themselves. He could have held the lower slope easily. Fought off the attack, trading time for more Vanir lives, inflicting a measure of pain against the invaders for the bloodshed and rape they had visited on Cimmeria. The bloodlust building up within him called for it. Called for their pain, their deaths. Their damnation! But the defense of Gorram was not about slaughter, however much he thirsted for it.

It was proving to the local chieftain that Kern's strategy was sound, at all levels.

An arrow hammered against the bronze facing of Kern's shield, glanced away, and buried itself in the narrow cattle path next to him. Snarling, Kern came close to drawing sword and leaping down the hillside on the assault right then.

"Nay," he whispered. It was not to be. Not yet.

"Back, back, back," he yelled down the hillside. Then watched from around the lip of his shield as Reave and Desagrena held the rock wall while the other four warriors broke cover and charged upslope. Ossian led the retreat, his shaved head easy to spot. Garret Blackpatch and Mogh. Gard Foehammer, who wavered, ready to fling himself back along the trail should Reave or Desa show any hesitation or sign of trouble.

There was none. Arrows stormed over the Vanir as Daol and Hydallan led one savage volley after another from the next level up. "Nock," Daol called out, his voice so calm

and steadying. Encouraging the others to greater speed. But it was his father who waited that extra second, making certain that Brig Tall-Wood and Ehmish were also set before yelling, "Loose!"

Four more ashwood shafts slashed down. Another shout of pain, and a raider stumbled to his knees with a gray shaft sticking into the meaty part of his thigh.

It gave Reave and Desagrena time enough to scramble after the others, ducking low beneath the Vanir's return volleys.

Desa also kept her shield between herself and the raiders, and a good thing she did as two more heavy shafts slammed into it with enough force to stick through the thin, metal facing. Reave was less fortunate, and howled as an arrow buried itself into his backside.

Kern jumped up, ready to lead a charge to his friend's defense, but Reave reached back to snap the shaft off, leaving the head buried in his rump. For now.

Painful, it would be. But hardly life-threatening.

Let them come, he reminded himself. That was the plan. Let the raiders come to Kern and his wolves.

They did. Taking the first level on the slope with a victorious roar. Eight warriors gained the rock wall and quickly raised shields to ward off the arrows hammering down at them, creating a large bulwark, behind which more raiders came. Four more warriors. Then the archers, some of them throwing aside their own bows for the grip of naked steel in their hands.

Then their leader, who finally broke out from beneath the fog's cover.

Kern had known without ever seeing him that he would be a Vanir warrior. Nay frost-haired servant of Grimnir. Not today. Not one of the Ymirish who had turned Kern's life upside down this last winter when he'd learned he shared blood with the strange northerners. Worse, when others learned it as well.

This man had the rawboned look of a Vanir. A thick beard with golden rings braided into the coarse, flame-red hair, and a steel cap with long, steer's horns mounted on it. He wore a boiled-leather cuirass, banded with strips of metal, and a mailed skirt of thick bronze scales. He carried a war sword in one hand, a tall shield in the other, and strode up the hill as easily as Kern might walk along a dry, forest path. A Vanir war horn hung off his wide belt, bouncing against one muscular thigh.

Arrows struck at him immediately, hammering into his shield, some piercing the metal facing with enough force to stick into the wooden back. With vicious swipes, the Vanir war leader scraped his sword down the shield's face, cutting the arrows away. When he did so, he opened his entire body up, as if daring one of the archers to put a shaft in his chest.

None did. Few even came close.

Kern had let the Vanir come this far. This far, but no farther, he promised, watching as the enemy warriors readied themselves and lost only one more of their number to the Cimmerian archers. Then they quite simply threw themselves up the next slope with reckless abandon and a berserker's yell at their lips.

Feet churned into the muddy slope. Swords reversed, stabbing down into the earth to be used as climbing poles; shields were thrust ahead to buy themselves a measure of grace. They swarmed forward faster than any would have thought, clawing and digging their way up the slope to get at the defenders. Their enemy.

Bows were cast aside now as Vanir fought for purchase on the second wall, one final level below Kern, and swords rasped free of their sheaths as all fell to defending the

village slopes. Ten of Kern's best, holding back half again their own number. They fought side by side, back to back when necessary. Swords rose and fell, stabbed and parried and slashed back in answer.

Blood splattered on the ground, and the cries of wounded men and women shattered what little resolve Kern had managed to guard.

Drawing his own sword free, he stormed along the upper path, searching for a break in the sharpened stakes where he could easily slide down amid the fighting. Aodh was on his feet as well, though by agreement none of the nearby Gorram left their places of concealment. Their place was to protect the third and final level, and the village, which squatted on the slopes above them. That had been the agreement, and the wager, that Kern Wolf-Eye had made.

A wager he might be in danger of losing, now, as more of the Vanir clawed for purchase and gained the lower slope. Two sword-bearing warriors rushed forward and pinned Daol back against a rocky cleft, the younger man getting his own broadsword around in time to deflect a killing thrust aimed at his chest.

The second Vanir came overhead with a chopping slash, and Daol ducked aside barely in time. The blade struck sparks from the stone a finger's breadth from Daol's eye. Again, and Daol ducked in the other direction, avoiding death.

"Nay!"

Kern's yell was a full-throated roar of anger and strength. Gathering himself, he strode forward to the edge of the path and leaped out over the overhang of sharpened poles. Sword raised and shield held out to one side, he fell the length of a man, his feet stomping down on the shoulders of one of the raiders threatening his warrior, his friend.

He felt bones shift and break. Felt himself collapsing in a rough heap atop the raider, feet kicked out from beneath him. He landed hard on his shoulder, his side, against the raiders shield with the boss slicing along his arm and punching hard against his chain-mail vest. His head struck the side of the rocky cleft against which Daol had been pinned. Violet sparks and sheets of pain washed over his vision, clouding his mind.

He retained just enough sense to hold on to his sword. A good thing, as the raider standing above him hacked down at him, ringing his heavy blade against Kern's feeble guard and ignoring Daol in the sudden confusion.

A lethal mistake. Daol jumped forward to put three feet of steel through the raider's back, shoving the blade well through the Vanir's gut, then holding him up long enough for his dying scream to fade along with his strength. Blood rained and splattered over the ground, into Kern's face and hair. Then Daol kicked him free, sending the corpse in a headlong tumble back over the rock wall and downslope.

Another body followed after it as Gard Foehammer rammed his pike through a raider's chest. Then another, missing his head.

Kern climbed back to unsteady feet, feeling a weakness wash through him that had little to do with hitting his head. He shook away Daol's hand, shoving his lifelong friend to one side, wishing no touch, no sense of another's presence.

The violet afterglare of power swam in front of his eyes, and he knew that he'd done it again. Embraced that which he had nay use to be touching at all. Or even knowing. Or . . .

Kern felt the danger swimming up from the back of his mind before Daol ever reacted. His friend had half turned back to the rock wall. Then, suddenly, Daol's sword swept up and he moved for Kern's side no matter what the other man might say or do.

"Behind!" was all he had time to shout.

Too late, Kern spun around in a ready crouch. A touch slow and low, his blade came up into a guard position. Hardly at strength to meet the raider leader, he slipped past Ossian, who lay stretched out over the ground, unconscious or dead. The Vanir's war sword swung in a backhand slash for Kern's throat.

And then it happened. Time began to slow as a rage of power and strength flooded Kern's muscles, his mind. A hammering call, which was more than his own heartbeat, rang in his ears. He felt the darkness swell within him and was drawn to it even as its foul nature repulsed him, driving away everything he had ever known to be right in the world. Such an easy task, to step out of the way and let the darkness destroy this man who threatened him. Simple enough, if he would embrace the call.

He would not. He stoppered the flow of power, as he had many times these last few weeks. Choked it back without a care to what might happen. What would certainly happen. What nearly happened.

Amidst a small avalanche of rock and sharpened poles and a slide of mud, a jumble of gangly arms and unsteady legs and the flash of a dagger pounced in from the hillside to bury a good length of steel into the Vanir's side. Not enough to kill—hardly enough to throw him off his stride—but causing him to shorten his powerful blow, swinging the sword in too high, allowing Kern to drop out from beneath the deadly blade.

Falling to his knees, shield slamming into the ground as he caught himself, Kern stabbed into the man's stomach, ramming the entire length of his short sword in to the blood-slick hilt.

Hot gore gushed out over his hand, and Kern's grip slipped away from his sword as the raider pitched himself to one side. The Vanir leader slammed up against the muddy bank with his war sword raised overhead and his free hand clenched around the sword buried in his gut.

Pinning himself in place, as the Gorram youth bounced up with the speed and agility only young boys know. Shrieking a high-pitched cry, somewhere between a scream and a man's bellow, the lad rammed Kern's dagger into the chest of the hulking brute again, and again.

Half a hundred voices roared overhead in a thunderous ovation. Seeing the Vanir leader fall, and to a mere slip of a boy, the Gorram clansfolk broke cover and shook fists and weapons at the blanketed sky, letting their anger and celebration roll down off the mountainside. The cry was echoed poorly by the Vanir, as word of their leader's death quickly swept the path.

In singles and pairs, men and women of the north broke away from the fight. Leaping from the cattle trail, sliding-tumbling-falling back down to the lower path and then over the rock wall for another headlong pitch toward the forest floor and safety.

Or so they assumed.

Kern rose quickly to grab hold of the youth's hand, stopping the boy as he drew back to stab at the Vanir yet again. The youngster's breath came in hitching gasps, almost crying, as he stared up into the face of the man he'd helped kill, then into Kern's golden eyes. Tears streaked through the grime on the lad's face, but this time he did not flinch back. He stared in open defiance.

Kern shook his head, mute. Then, stepping to the edge of the trail to stare down the slope, he brought two fingers to his mouth and whistled. Three long, shrill blasts.

Like those of trapdoor spiders, five holes suddenly opened up in the ground on the lower slope. One had been disguised by thorny brush tied to a rough plank. Two others with

deadwood logs simple (and light) enough to roll back. Nahud'r and Valerus had capped their hiding places with their own shields, layering them with a piece of sod to fool the Vanir into thinking they walked over real ground.

Five spiderholes opened and out came a tangle of arms and swords, cutting and stabbing at the fleeing Vanir, seeking final blood. Old Finn cut two men down as they attempted to slide by him, hamstringing one and ramming his broadsword into the chest of another.

Valerus was less fortunate in his timing. He forced his shield over just in time to catch a booted foot in his face as a raider slipped and slid right into the hole with him.

There was a tangle of limbs and weapons as the two wrestled within the pit. Then Valerus stood back up and tossed a jaunty wave at the hillside.

Kern waited alongside the Gorram youth, watching. He counted six men and one woman who actually escaped to the roiling fog cover lying along the ground below. Seven left out of twenty-plus attackers. With a quick count of his own men—including Ossian, who was sitting up with Desagrena's help, holding a red-soaked batch of wool to the side of his head—it looked as if Kern's people would all live to fight another day.

And another.

This was their life now. And it would most likely be their deaths.

"Your men. They fight like more than their number," the boy said, stepping up next to Kern. He still held the gore-streaked dagger, blood dripping off the point of the blade. His breathing was calmer now, with only a small, hitching sob left to it.

"They do," Kern agreed. He checked up the slope, saw nearly the entire population of Gorram Village standing on the upper trails, crouched on the paths, and waiting in front of huts. Their moment of celebration having passed, now they watched the final moments of death playing out below.

"I think more than you have noticed."

With the rage of battle and the luring call of power fading back, he turned his mind once again toward his purpose here. Not a bad showing at all, in fact.

"Here." The boy held up Kern's dagger. "You'll be wanting this back, then."

Kern shook his head. "Keep it." He glanced over at the body of the Vanir's fallen leader, still propped up against the muddy hillside. "You earned it, by Crom."

That and more. Twelve summers, and a man now that he'd made his first kill.

"You won't tell anyone?" the boy asked. He wiped a filthy hand across his tear-streaked face. Now it merely looked muddy. Stronger. "You won't tell that I . . ."

Cried? Kern knew the heavy burden about to be laid across this boy's—this young man's—shoulders. Too soon. And hardly fair. But necessary, perhaps, if Cimmeria was going to survive.

"I won't tell," Kern promised, then nodded the newly made man back along the path where other warriors of Gorram waited for him. "I won't," he whispered, more for himself than.

"I've gotten very good at keeping secrets."