











YES, GREAT KING, THOUGH I'VE FALLEN FAR SINCE MY SERVICE THERE. BUT NOW MITRA HAS SHOWN ME MERCY AND JOINED MY PATH WITH YOURS!

YOU ALONE CAN BREAK THE CURSE THAT'S FILLED MY DAYS WITH SORROW AND MY NIGHTS WITH SLEEPLESS DREAD!



SEE, WHAT DID I TELL YOU? LUNATIC.

YOU'VE SERVED ME IN MANY LANDS, CRASSUS, BUT NEVER ON THE FRONTIER. THERE ARE HELLS BEYOND THE BLACK RIVER THAT WOULD BREAK THE MIND OF ANY MAN!



COME, BROTHER. WE'LL TALK...



...BUT FIRST I'LL SHOW YOU TO A PROPER MEAL.



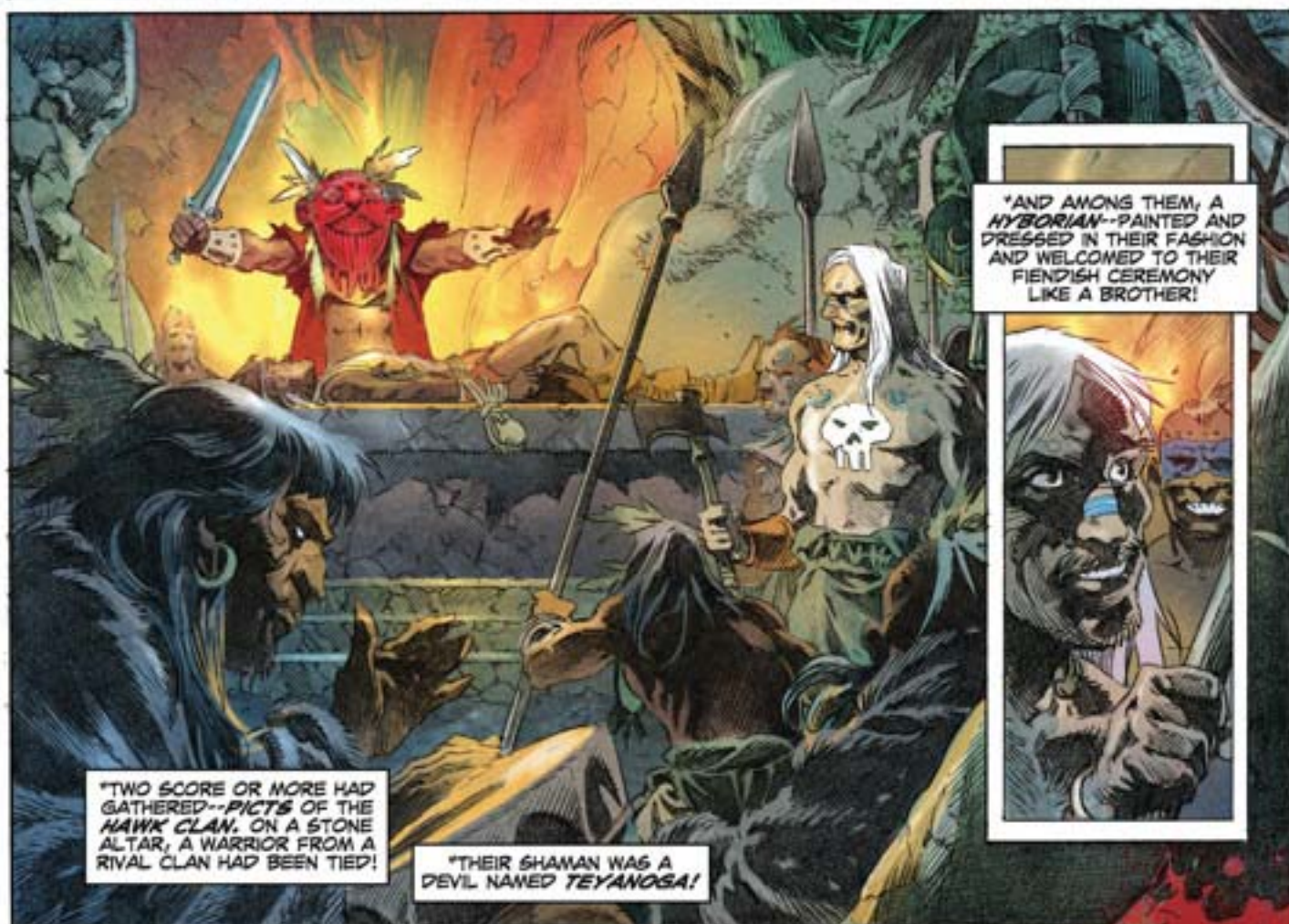








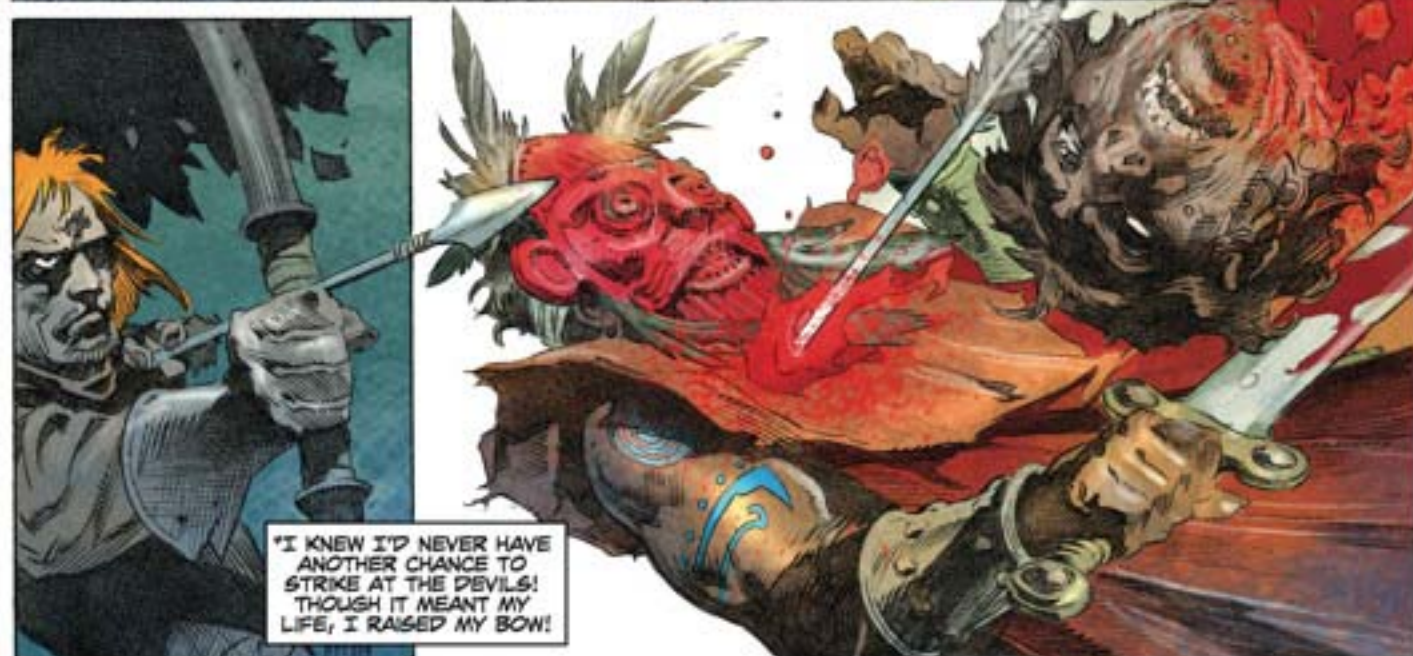
"THE NIGHT WAS BLACK AS A WITCH'S HATE. I WAS SCOUTING THE TERRITORY BEYOND THE THUNDER RIVER WHEN I HEARD THE MUTTER OF DRUMS.



"TWO SCORE OR MORE HAD GATHERED--PICTS OF THE HAWK CLAN. ON A STONE ALTAR, A WARRIOR FROM A RIVAL CLAN HAD BEEN TIED!

"THEIR SHAMAN WAS A DEVIL NAMED TEYANOSA!

"AND AMONG THEM, A HYBORIAN--PAINTED AND DRESSED IN THEIR FASHION AND WELCOMED TO THEIR FIENDISH CEREMONY LIKE A BROTHER!



"I KNEW I'D NEVER HAVE ANOTHER CHANCE TO STRIKE AT THE DEVILS! THOUGH IT MEANT MY LIFE, I RAISED MY BOW!





"BUT LUCK AND THE GODS SEEMED WITH ME. THROUGH THE LONG NIGHT I FLED, UNTIL THEIR WHOOPS AND CRIES FADED BEHIND ME.



"IT WAS ALMOST DAYBREAK WHEN I CROSSED THE RIVER AND REACHED THE VILLAGE OF *SCHOHIRA*.



"IN A TAVERN I TOLD MY TALE. NO SOONER HAD I SPOKEN THAN A NEW PATRON DARKENED THE DOOR.

"BEL'S BALLS, IT WAS *HE*--THE VERY MAN WHOM I'D SEEN WITH THE PICTS! HIS NAME WAS *VALERIAN*, AND HE WAS AN IMPORTANT LORD IN THE TOWN!



"THE TRAITOR DENIED MY CHARGE UNTIL I SHOWED MY BROTHERS THE PICTISH MARK UPON HIS CHEST! HE WAS TAKEN AWAY IN CHAINS TO AWAIT HIS TRIAL.



"BUT THAT VERY NIGHT, *VALERIAN* ESCAPED THROUGH THE AID OF HIS HALF-CASTE PICTISH MISTRESS, A WITCH CALLED *KWARADA*!



"MY BROTHER RANGERS  
AND I TRACKED THEM TO A  
LONE CABIN NEAR LYNX CREEK,  
ABANDONED BY SOME SETTLER  
FAMILY YEARS BEFORE.



"INSIDE WERE VALERIAN  
AND KWARADA! WITH THEM,  
*OTHER* HYBORIANS--  
GUNDERMAN RENEGADES  
OF FOUL REPUTE--  
LOCKED IN PARLEY WITH  
WAR LEADERS FROM THE  
PICT'S GREAT TRIBES!



"THE TRAITOR SOUGHT TO  
TAKE ADVANTAGE OF  
THE TURMOIL CAUSED BY  
YOUR UPRISING AGAINST  
NUMEDIDES TO ELEVATE  
HIMSELF TO THE THRONE!



"WITH THE CIVILIZED NATIONS IN  
CONFUSION, HE IMPLORING THE PICT  
TRIBES TO UNITE AS ONE AND SWEEP  
INTO THE EAST--FIRST TO AGULONIA,  
THEN TO NEMEDIA AND BEYOND!

"TO SEAL THEIR TRUST,  
THE TRAITOR HAD BROUGHT  
THEM A SACRED GIFT,  
ONCE THOUGHT LOST...AN  
ANCIENT CROWN THAT  
KWARADA HAD ACQUIRED!  
AT THE SIGHT OF IT, THE  
PICTISH CHIEFTAINS GASPED!



"THE TRAITOR'S MAD SCHEME  
WOULD NEVER BE REALIZED.  
MY BROTHER RANGERS AND  
I STORMED THE CABIN!





"TEYANOGA HAD ESCAPED DEATH ONCE. I MADE SURE HE WOULDN'T DO SO AGAIN! MY THRUST SENT HIM TUMBLING AGAINST KWARADA AND THE CROWN!



"SURELY THE RELIC WAS THE KEY TO VALERIAN'S PLAN! I KNEW I HAD TO REACH IT...



"...AND MAKE IT *MINE!*"



"WHAT HAPPENED TO THE OTHERS, I DO NOT KNOW.



"FROM THAT MOMENT FORTH, ONLY THE *CROWN* MATTERED!"



AND I HAVE POSSESSED IT AND KEPT IT SAFE TILL THIS VERY HOUR.







