



Shadows in Zamboula

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‘Peril hides in the house of Aram Baksh!’

The speaker’s voice quivered with earnestness and his lean, black-nailed fingers clawed at Conan’s mightily muscled arm as he croaked his warning. He was a wiry, sun-burnt man with a straggling black beard, and his ragged garments proclaimed him a nomad. He looked smaller and meaner than ever in contrast to the giant Cimmerian with his black brows, broad chest, and powerful limbs. They stood in a corner of the Sword-Makers’ Bazar, and on either side of them flowed past the many-tongued, many-colored stream of the Zamboula streets, which is exotic, hybrid, flamboyant and clamorous.

Conan pulled his eyes back from following a bold-eyed, red-lipped Ghanara whose short skirt bared her brown thigh at each insolent step, and frowned down at his importunate companion.

‘What do you mean by peril?’ he demanded.

The desert man glanced furtively over his shoulder before replying, and lowered his voice.

‘Who can say? But desert men and travelers *have* slept in the house of Aram Baksh, and never been seen or heard of again. What became of them? *He* swore they rose and went their way—and it is true that no citizen of the city has ever disappeared from his house. But no one saw the travelers again, and men say that goods and equipment recognized as theirs have been seen in the bazars. If Aram did not sell them, after doing away with their owners, how came they here?’

‘I have no goods,’ growled the Cimmerian, touching the shagreen-bound hilt of the broadsword that hung at his hip. ‘I have even sold my horse.’

‘But it is not always rich strangers who vanish by night from the house of Aram Baksh!’ chattered the Zuagir. ‘Nay, poor desert men have slept there—because his score is less than that of the other taverns—and have been seen no more. Once a chief of the Zuagirs whose son had thus vanished complained to the satrap, Jungir Khan, who ordered the house searched by soldiers.’

‘And they found a cellar full of corpses?’ asked Conan in good-humored derision.

‘Nay! They found naught! And drove the chief from the city with threats and curses! But—’ he drew closer to Conan and shivered—‘something else was found! At the edge of the desert, beyond the houses, there is a clump of palm trees, and within that grove there is a pit. And within that pit have been found human bones, charred and blackened! Not once, but many times!’

‘Which proves what?’ grunted the Cimmerian.

‘Aram Baksh is a demon! Nay, in this accursed city which Stygians built and which Hyrkanians rule—where white, brown and black folk mingle together to produce hybrids of all unholy hues and breeds—who can tell who is a man, and who a demon in disguise? Aram Baksh is a demon in the form of a man! At night he assumes his true guise and carries his guests off into the desert where his fellow demons from the waste meet in conclave.’

‘Why does he always carry off strangers?’ asked Conan skeptically.

‘The people of the city would not suffer him to slay their people, but they care naught for the strangers who fall into his hands. Conan, you are of the West, and know not the secrets of this ancient land. But, since the beginning of happenings, the demons of the desert have worshipped Yog, the Lord of the Empty Abodes, with fire—fire that devours human victims.

‘Be warned! You have dwelt for many moons in the tents of the Zuagirs, and you are our brother! Go not to the house of Aram Baksh!’



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