

Red Nails

Short Story by Robert E. Howard

Adaptation for D&D by Wesley Connally

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This series of adventures that I created are based on Robert E. Howard's Conan short stories (or with some exceptions, Carter/de Camp). I've changed a few things here and there, and fleshed out places like abandoned palaces etc. for a true dungeon crawling experience. There should be a few surprises for those who have read the short stories. Almost all of the text boxes for you, the DM, to read are taken directly from Howard's own writing. This provides a great atmosphere for your players. You may warn them that some are lengthy, but just sit back, relax, and allow the text to paint the world for them. This will enrich their experience.

I have modified Howard's text to represent plural adventurers and rewrote all text for the present tense. I had to add a few dialogue boxes of my own writing to fill in important roleplaying gaps in the original story lines.

All adventures are written for D&D 2nd edition, but could easily be adapted to more modern versions. I highly recommend my other handouts and rules to create a more full Conan-World experience. I also recommend familiarizing yourself with the original Howard/Carter/de Camp story.

Levels: 7-8, but at least 20 levels

Reputation: 5, Zingara (Country Reputation is based on a 1-5 scale from barely known (1) to heroic status (5). For every 5 points of Adventure Reputation the characters earn, based on a successful adventure, their score for the Country Reputation in the country where the adventure takes place, goes up by 1. Reputation will affect NPC reaction rolls, prices, jealousies, women etc.)

Adventure Summary

Characters begin tracking down Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, a nemesis and violator of pirate code. After finding her on an island, they have an encounter with a dinosaur. Eventually, they strike out into the desert having seen the gleam of civilization. They find a huge covered city inhabited by two rival clans and become embroiled in their feud.

World Map

At any appropriate time, you can show players Figure 0: World Map—Zingara and let them know this is where they will be adventuring.

To capture the spirit of the Conan world, I offer a “Babe-In-Distress bonus (BID).” As there is almost always a BID in the stories and thus these adventures, I have the characters “compete” for her favor. If you wish to do this, when the characters first meet the BID, have characters average their Comeliness and Charisma scores. Then have them roll a d20. The one who comes closest *without going over* their averaged score has struck the fancy of the BID for whatever reason (“he’s not the best looking, but he has kind eyes”). He then becomes responsible to oversee her safety. If the adventure is completed and she is still alive with only a few nicks, that character is awarded a 10% experience point bonus, not to mention her undying gratitude in the bedroom. Of course, this process apply to female player characters as well. The BID perhaps is intimidated by men and seeks the safety of female protection, or perhaps the BID “just swings that way...”

Valeria is the BID in this adventure. Winning the BID indicates that not only does she have a (mild) soft spot for the character, but he has some feelings for her. Not wanting to unjustly leave her to the wilds, he takes off after her with the aid of his friends at the cost of their ship sailing on without them.

Part 1: The Skull on the Crag

You leave a perfectly good ship off the coast of Zingara and head off into the jungle as you see the ship sailing away. The reason: you are tracking down Valeria, a sea wench well known among pirates. She escaped several nights ago jumping off the ship after having stabbed a would-be rapist through the heart. You have finally caught her, and see her, standing proudly atop a small rise among the leafy foliage.

Valeria is tall, full-bosomed and large-limbed, with compact shoulders. Her whole figure reflects an unusual strength, without detracting from the femininity of her appearance. She is all woman, in spite of her bearing and her garments. The latter are incongruous, in view of her present environs. Instead of a skirt she wore short, wide-legged silk breeches, which ceases a hand’s breath short of her knees, and are upheld by a wide silken sash worn as a girdle. Flaring-topped boots of soft leather come almost to her knees, and a low-necked, wide-collared, wide-sleeved silk shirt completes her costume. On one shapely hip she wears a straight double-edged sword, and on the other a long dirk. Her unruly golden hair, cut square at her shoulders, is confined by a band of crimson satin. Against the background of somber, primitive forest she poses with unconscious picturesqueness, bizarre and out of place. She should have been posed against a background of sea-clouds, painted masts and wheeling gulls. There is the color of the sea in her wide eyes. And that is how it should be, because this is Valeria of the Red Brotherhood, whose deeds are celebrated in song and ballad wherever seafarers gather.

Valeria draws steel thinking they have come to get revenge for the murder. Characters will have to convince her otherwise or she will attack the first up the small slope.

Assuming the characters can placate her fears, she desires to climb the nearby outcropping of rock to get a good view of the countryside.

Ahead of you, presently, you see an outcropping of dark, flint-like rock that slopes upward into what looks like a rugged crag rising among the trees. Its summit is lost to view amidst a cloud of encircling leaves. Perhaps its peak rises above the treetops, and from it you can see what lays beyond—if, indeed,

anything lays beyond but more of this apparently illimitable forest through which you have trodden for so many days.

A narrow ridge forms a natural ramp that leads up the steep face of the crag. After you ascend some fifty feet, you come to the belt of leaves that surround the rock. The trunks of the trees do not crowd close to the crag, but the ends of their lower branches extend about it, veiling it with their foliage. You grope on in leafy obscurity, not able to see either above or below you; but presently you glimpse blue sky, and a moment later come out in the clear, hot sunlight and see the forest roof stretching away under your feet.

You are standing on a broad shelf which is about even with the treetops, and from it rises a spire-like jut that is the ultimate peak of the crag you just climbed. But something else catches your attention at the moment. Your foot strikes something in the litter of blown dead leaves which carpets the shelf. You kick them aside and look down on the skeleton of a man. You run an experienced eye over the bleached frame, but see no broken bones nor any sign of violence. The man must have died a natural death; though why he should have climbed a tall crag to die you cannot imagine.

You scramble up to the summit of the spire and look toward the horizons. The forest roof—which looks like a floor from your vantage point—was just as impenetrable as from below. You see the jumping of some gazelle then as quickly disappear within the foliage. You glance northward, in the direction from which you had come. You see only the rolling green ocean stretching away and away, with just a vague blue line in the distance to hint of the hill range you had crossed days before, to plunge into this leafy waste.

West and East is the same though the blue hill-line is lacking in these directions. But when you turn your eyes southward you stiffen. A mile away the forest thins out and ceases abruptly, giving way to a cactus-dotted plain. And in the midst of that plain rises the walls of a huge mountain. You catch your breath for something metallic catches the sunlight and reflects like a brilliant star.

A chill shivers up your back. Back in the forest had burst forth an appalling medley of screams—the screams of the gazelle you surmise in terror and agony. Mingling with their screams there comes the snap of splintering bones.

From beyond the thicket comes the nosy crunching of bones and the loud rending of flesh, together with the grinding, slobbering sounds of a horrible feast.

Through the thicket is thrust the head of nightmare and lunacy. Grinning jaws bare rows of dripping yellow tusks; above the yawning mouth wrinkles a saurian-like snout. Huge eyes, like those of a python a thousand times magnified, stare unwinkingly at your petrified forms clinging to the rock above it. Blood smears the scaly, flabby lips and drips from the huge mouth.

The head, bigger than that of a crocodile, is further extended on a long scaled neck on which stand up rows of serrated spikes, and after it, crushing down the briars and saplings waddles the body of a titan, a gigantic, barrel-bellied torso on absurdly short legs. The whitish belly almost rakes the ground, while the serrated backbone rises higher than you could reach on tiptoe. A long spiked tail, like than of a gargantuan scorpion, trails out behind. **[Show Figure 1: The Giant Lizard Beast]**

[Dinosaur, Carnivorous (AC:5 HD:15 hp:90 Th:4 D:3d10 SA:crit=X3 (or use a Crit damage table designed for size differences) SD: Mv:15 S:H ML:19 EX:5000)]

After being pinned on the steep slope for a few rounds, have anyone with Herbalism make a PER check. Success means that they recognize a type of large fruit that is poisonous before it's fully ripened. The fruit depends from a tropical fruit-bearing tree and is anywhere between 10' and 18' feet away depending on the branch. If gathered by some means, and coated onto a weapon, successful hits with the weapon will cause extreme stinging. Damage totaling 20 hp or any hit in the creature's face area, will cause it to run to a near-by pool. It will be gone for only 7 rounds whereupon it will return to eat or pursue fleeing heroes. It will not pursue the party into the desert.

Because of the density of the jungle, a normal character without the Running proficiency can run the mile to the desert's edge in 14 minutes (rounds) with armor/backpacks etc including two rounds to get off of their perch. Taking into account no movement penalty for the beast, and assuming characters are running at 12" to 15", the beast will catch up to the characters when they are two running rounds away from the desert, or 1/7 of a mile. Since all characters don't run exactly the same (at 12") I have them roll an opposed d12 roll versus their pursuer and take the difference. That's how many feet or yards they gain or lose in a particular round. In any case, the PCs will have to contend with the beast of their heels for about two rounds if they left immediately after the beast started for the watering hole.

After defeating or escaping the dinosaur, darkness descends in the desert. Valeria, if no one else, does not wish to stay another night in jungles that confine movement and sight and wishes to make for the desert beyond which a gleam had been seen in the sunlight.

The sun has set and darkness is gathering over the plain, lightened a little by the stars that make stunted ghosts out of the cactus growths. In the distance you see the silhouette of the city. The moon comes up behind the city, etching walls and towers blackly in the yellow glow. Valeria shivers. Black against the moon the strange city has a somber, sinister look. The sun rises up behind the city, turning the towers to a sinister crimson.

Optional encounter: if your party is very healthy, and spellcasters have very high Constitutions, you may want to knock them down a point or two with this poisonous night encounter. Remember, PCs don't usually sleep with armor on! If so, that alone will drain 1 CON point per night it is worn (hard to be rested in armor).

[Scorpion, Giant (4) (AC:7 HD:2 hp:14 Th:16 D: d4 SA: Poison 1 CON immediately + d2 CON over the next turn SD: Mv:15 S: 1' ML:17 EX: 140)]

Other than strange sounds, nothing unusual happens during the night. The next day...

As you approach the city, the sun rises beyond the city's horizon. "Black last night against the moon," grunts Valeria, her eyes clouding with the abysmal superstitions. "Blood-red as a threat of blood against the sun this dawn. I do not like this city."

Closing the distance between you and the city, you look uneasily at it. No helmets or spearheads gleam

on battlements, no trumpets sound, no challenge rings from the towers. A silence as absolute as that of the forest broods over the walls and minarets.

The sun is high above the eastern horizon when you stand before the great gate in the northern wall, in the shadow of the lofty rampart. Rust flecks the iron bracings of the mighty bronze portal. Spiderwebs glisten thickly on hinge and sill and bolted panel.

Part 2: The Blaze of the Fire Jewels

The rusted bolt on the city's doors can be broken with a regular open doors roll. Once in:

You are not looking into an open street or court as one would have expected. The opened gate, or door, gives directly into a long, broad hall which runs away and away until its vista grows indistinct in the distance. It is of heroic proportions, and the floor is of a curious red stone, cut in square tiles, that seems to smolder as if with the reflection of flames. The walls are of a shiny green material. The vaulted ceiling is of lapis lazuli, adorned with clusters of great green stones that gleam with a poisonous radiance.

"Green fire-stones!" exclaims Valeria. "That's what the people of Punt call them. They're supposed to be the petrified eyes of those prehistoric snakes the ancients called Golden Serpents. They glow like a cat's eyes in the dark. At night this hall would be lighted by them, but it would be a hellishly weird illumination." Day has filtered into the great hall through the open door. Sunlight is finding its way somehow into the hall, and you quickly see the source. High up in the vaulted ceiling skylights are set in slot-like openings--translucent sheets of some crystalline substance. In the splotches of shadow between them, the green jewels wink like the eyes of angry cats. Beneath your feet the dully lurid floor smolders with changing hues and colors of flame. It is like treading the floors of Hell with evil stars blinking overhead.

Three balustraded galleries run along on each side of the hall, one above the other. It appears like a four-storied house, with the hall extending to the roof. It is like a long street with a door at the very far end, almost too imperceptible to see.

Cobwebs hang in the corners, but there is no perceptible accumulation of dust on the floor, or on the tables and seats of marble, jade, or carnelian which occupy the chambers. Here and there are rugs of silk known as Khitan which is practically indestructible. Nowhere do you find any windows, or doors opening into streets or courts. Each door merely opens into another chamber or hall.

Allow the party to roam around a bit in the empty halls and rooms. The following can be determined:

1. There are no bodies (so disease did not cause the emptiness).
2. No treasure anywhere (except the walls and floors etc)
3. Some of the chambers lack illumination, and their doorways show black as the mouth of the Pit.

At one point, allow a character to find a drawing on the wall on the second or third level:

The figures portrayed are those of slender, olive-skinned men and women, with finely chiseled, exotic features. They wear filmy robes and many delicate jeweled ornaments, and are depicted mostly in

attitudes of feasting, dancing, or lovemaking.

Then, soon after:

Something catches your eye below, a moving shadow! A man is slinking along the hall. He in no way resembles the figures depicted on the friezes. He is slightly above middle height, very dark, though not Negroid. He is naked but for a scanty silk clout that only partly covers his muscular hips, and a leather girdle, a hand's breadth broad, about his lean waist. His long black hair hangs in lank strands about his shoulders, giving him a wild appearance. He is gaunt, but knots and cords of muscles stand out on his arms and legs. He slinks along, stooping in a semi-crouch, his head turning from side to side. He grasps a wide-tipped blade in his right hand and you see it shake with the intensity of the emotion that grips him. He is afraid, trembling in the grip of some dire terror. When he turns his head you catch the blaze of wild eyes among the lank strands of black hair. He does not see you. On tiptoe he glides across the hall and vanishes through an open door. A moment later you hear a choking cry, and then silences falls again.

[When the party decides to investigate]

You glide along the gallery until you come to a door above the one through which the man had passed. It opens into another, smaller gallery that encircles a large chamber. This chamber is on the third floor, and its ceiling is not so high as that of the hall. It is lighted only by the fire-stones, and their weird green glow leaves the spaces under the balcony in shadows.

The man you had seen is still in the chamber. He lays face down on a dark crimson carpet in the middle of the room. His body is limp, his arms spread wide. His curved swords lays near him. Suddenly another figure enters the grim drama. He is a man similar to the first, and he comes in by a door opposite that which gives upon the hall.

His eyes glare at the sight of the man on the floor, and he speaks something in a staccato voice that sounds like "Chicmec!" The other does not move. The man steps quickly across the floor, bends, grips the fallen man's shoulder and turns him over. A choking cry escapes him as the heads falls back limply, disclosing a throat that has been severed from ear to ear. The man lets the corpse fall back upon the blood-stained carpet, and springs to his feet, shaking like a wind-blown leaf. His face is an ashy mask of fear.

In the shadows beneath the balcony a ghostly light begins to glow and grow, a light that is not part of the fire-stone gleam. In the dimly visible throbbing radiance, there floats a human skull, and it is from this skull—human yet appallingly misshapen—that the spectral lights seems to emanate. It hangs there like a disembodied head, conjured out of night, and the shadows, grow more and more distinct: human, and yet not human as you know humanity. Slowly the skull becomes more visible as a man-like figure whose naked torso and limbs shine whitely, with the hue of bleached bones. The bare skull on its shoulders grins eyelessly, in the midst of its unholy nimbus, and the man confronting it seems unable to take his eyes from it. He stands still, his sword dangles from nerveless fingers, on his face the expression of a man bound by the spells of a mesmerist.

[Characters should choose to help at this point. Roll initiative.]

Several other shadows now emerge from the darkness, a glint of steel and bared teeth the only evidence of their approach.

Xotalanc [Show ta lank] Warriors (10) (AC:8 HD:2+3 hp:16 Th:17 D:d8+1 SA: SD: Mv:12 S:M ML:16 EX:150)

Xotalanc Priest (AC: 5 (from Barkskin) HD:5 hp:35 Th:12 D:d8+3 SA: SD: see mask below Mv:12 S:M ML:16 EX:450)

Bone Club +1; 10 Chant Beads; Mask of Xuchotl; Spells: Cure Light Wounds +2 from WIS; Barkskin (AC:5); Cause Moderate Wounds +2 from WIS; Silence Person; Protection from Good

Chant Beads: Upon holding a chant bead and invoking the name of one's god, a mysterious chant fills the air giving allies of the cleric +1/+1 until the battle is done. It takes one round to invoke and thereafter the priest can engage in any other activity. Such beads are not cumulative.

Mask of Xuchotl (relic): If players do not say they look away during melee, they must save vs spells or be Hypnotized. Players fight at -3 on combat dice if they attempt to avert their eyes. Once Hypnotized, the wearer may give a Suggestion. Techotl's warning is not without reason (see below). Wearer's must Save vs Spell or have their alignment shifted one step toward CE.

When the battle is over, Techotl approaches (for he survives). If anyone speaks Stygian, you can read Techotl's words.

The man you defended staggers up, yammering in what seems to be a dialect of Stygian. “Ten slain! Ten dead dogs! Ten crimson nails for the black pillar!” He begins to dance madly, stomping on his former foes. He then turns to you “I am Techotl [Tay cho tel]. Who are you? Whence come you? What do you in Xuchotl?” Then rushing on, without waiting for you to reply, “But you are friends--- gods, goddess, devil, it makes no difference! You have slain the Burning Skull! It was but a man beneath it, after all! We deemed it a demon they conjured up out of the catacombs!” [Play up Techotl's eccentric but endearing character]

[If someone starts to examine the skull, Techotl exclaims]: “Do not touch it! Do not even look at it! Madness and death lurk in it. The wizards of Xotalanc [Show ta lank] understand its secret—they found it in the catacombs, where lie the bones of terrible kings who ruled in Xuchotl in the black centuries of the past. To gaze upon it freezes the blood and withers the brain of a man who understands not its mystery. To touch it causes madness and destruction.”

Listen!” He stops short in his raving and stiffens, straining his ears with painful intensity. “We must hasten!” he whispers. “They are west of the Great Hall! They may be all around us here! They may be creeping upon us even now!” He motions for you to follow, his eyes wide with fear.

“Come! My people will welcome you and honor you!”

Techotl instantly mounts a stair leading up to the gallery. Having reached the gallery, he plunges

through a door that leads to the west, and hurries through chamber after chamber each lighted by skylights or fire jewels.

As the party gets to know Techotl, they may begin to question him. Below are some possible questions and their answers:

1. Where are you from? I am from the quarter Tecuhltli [Tay kwelt lee].
2. What were you doing when we saw you? I and the man who lies with his throat cut, come into the Halls of Silence to try to ambush some of the Xotalancas [Show ta lank az]. But we became separated and I returned to find him with his gullet slit.
3. You mentioned nails for a pillar? Yes, red nails! You will see; you will see in Tecuhltli [Tay kwelt lee].
4. How long have you dwelt here? I was born in the castle of Tecuhltli 35 years ago. I have never set foot outside the city. Olmec shall tell you all when we reach Tecuhltli.

After traveling down the, what seems, interminable hallway, your senses are suddenly galvanized by a soft sound of a door opening behind you. "Run!" yelled Techotl [Tay cho tel] with a note of hysteria in his voice. As he runs, your ears catch the sound of something slithering mixed with the feet of men.

The Crawler (Naga:) (AC: 6 HD: hp: Th:9 D:d4/2d4 SA: poison sv or d2+2d4 rounds of sleep SD: Mv:13 S: ML: EX:4000) Its spells: Magic Missile; Flaming Sphere; Acid Arrow; Darkness; Fireball 15' diameter

A ball of bright light flares up the stairs, followed by another and another. Pains and screams sound from your comrades as it impacts their bodies. You glance behind to see the source of this foul magic. Your nerves tingle down your spine as you witness the monstrosity behind you. A large snake-like creature worms and writhes its way up the stairwell, its purple-black skin glowing briefly in the flare of bright light momentarily illuminating its body. But it is its head that causes the nauseous feeling in your gut. The snake-like body ends in a human head presenting a baleful glare and scowl. Then darkness, and again a flare of light. This time the creature has its mouth agape, showing long fangs dripping with saliva. Its tail lashes to and fro, a heavy stinger transfixed upon its end.

Eventually, hopefully, the party ascends the stairwell and bolts the door fast.

If they ask what that slithery thing was:

"It was the Crawler! A monster they have brought out of the catacombs to aid them! What it is, we do not know, but we have found our people hideously slain by it. In Set's name, hasten! If they put it on our trail, it will follow us to the very doors of Tecuhltli! They ran through a series of green-lit chambers, traversed a broad hall, and halted before a giant bronze door. "This is Tecuhltli!" [Tay kwelt lee].

Part 3: The People of the Feud

Techotl smites on the bronze door with his clenched hand, and then turns sidewise, so that he can watch back along the hall. “Men have been smitten down before this door, when they thought they were safe,” he says.

There is a long pause.

“They are looking at us through the Eye,” he continues, “They are puzzled at the sight of you.” He lifts his voice and calls: “Open the door, Excelan! It is I, Techotl, with friends from the great world beyond the forest!--They will open,” he assures you.

[Characters must make a listen check—if they succeed, they hear something slithering beyond the last door through which they came.]

Techotl goes ashy again and attacks the door with his fists, screaming: “Open, you fools, open! The Crawler is at our heels!” He turns to you, “Tell them, quickly!”

[A character must make a CHR check. If they fail, the doors will not open until they defeat the impending attack of 8 Xotalanc Warriors and the Crawler.]

Once inside...

Inside the square chamber into which you have come, heavy bolts are drawn across the door, and the chain locked into place. The door is made to stand the battering of a siege. Four men stand on guard, of the same lank-haired, dark-skinned breed as Techotl, with spears in their hands and swords at their hips. In the wall near the door there is a complicated contrivance of mirrors which you guess is the Eye Techotl had mentioned, so arranged that a narrow, crystal-paned slot in the wall can be looked through from without. The four guardsmen stare at you with wonder, but ask no question, nor did Techotl vouchsafe any information. He moves with easy confidence now, as if he has shed his cloak of indecision and fear the instant he crossed the threshold.

The hall ends in an ornate door, before which stands no guard. Without ceremony Techotl thrust the door open and ushers you into a broad chamber, where some thirty dark-skinned men and women lounging on satin-covered couches spring up with exclamations of amazement. The men, all except one, are of the same type as Techotl, and the women are equally dark and strange-eyed, though not unbeautiful in a weird dark way. They wear sandals, golden breastplates, and scanty silk skirts supported by gem-crusted girdles, and their black manes, cut square at their naked shoulders, are bound with silver circlets.

On a wide ivory seat on a jade dais sits a man and a woman who differ subtly from the others. He is a giant, with an enormous sweep of breast and the shoulders of a bull. Unlike the others, he is bearded,

with a thick, blue-black beard which falls almost to his broad girdle. He wears a robe of purple silk which reflects changing sheens of color with his every movement, and one wide sleeve, drawn back to his elbow, reveals a forearm massive with corded muscles. The band which confines his blue-black locks is set with glittering jewels.

The woman beside him springs to her feet with a startled exclamation as you enter, and her eyes, passing over you, fix themselves with burning intensity on Valeria. She is tall and lithe, by far the most beautiful woman in the room. She is clad more scantily even than the others; for instead of a skirt she wears merely a broad strip of gilt-worked purple cloth fastened to the middle of her girdle which falls below her knees. Another strip at the back of her girdle completes that part of her costume, which she wears with a cynical indifference. Her breast-plates and the circlet about her temples are adorned with gems. In her eyes alone of all the dark-skinned people there lurked no brooding gleam of madness. She speaks no word after her first exclamation; **[If the characters make a PER check, read this last sentence]** She stands tensely, her hands clenched, staring at Valeria. **[Regardless of the PER check, show the party “Figure 3: Olmec and the Court.”]**

“Who are these people!” booms Olmec the Prince.

Techotl bows low, “Prince Olmec,” addressing the giant of a man. He introduces you, butchering your names as best he can. **[It would add humor to actually mispronounce their names in his accent]** He retells his meeting with you and the battles you have fought. He concludes with “Aye! [X] crimson nails there are to be driven into the pillar of vengeance!”

He points at a black column of ebony which stands between the dais. Hundreds of red dots scar its polished surface—the bright scarlet heads of heavy copper nails driven into the black wood.

The prince says, “Tell us your story of how you came to our city, but first, we must be brought food and drink!” He claps his hands thunderously.

As the party relates their tale, and it will provide interest to see how they handle Valeria's murderous nature, the royalty and court listens intently. If, or when, they mention the slaying of the dinosaur beast read the following:

A wine vessel slips from Techotl's hand to crash on the floor. His dusky skin goes ashy, Olmec starts to his feet, an image of stunned amazement, and a low gasp of awe or terror breaths up from the others. Some slip to their knees as if their legs would not support them. Only the Princess seems not to have heard.

The Tecuhltlites **[Tay kwel tel ites]** relate how it was believed that the lizard beasts are immortal and that entire armies would perish against the dragon-gods.

The woman on the dais speaks loudly, her words tripping in her haste. “Now that you have ventured here, there is no escape from Xuchotl! You will spend the rest of your lives in this city!”

[After the party's reaction]

“She did not mean that you are prisoners,” interposes Olmec. “We are your friends. We would not restrain you against your will. But I fear other circumstances will make it impossible for you to leave Xuchotl.” [PER check at -3; if successful read this next sentence.] His eyes flicker to Valeria, and he lowers them quickly.

“This woman is Tascela,” he says, “She is a princess of Tecuhltli.”

At a certain point, if the conversation turns to the people's history:

Olmec tells you the history of Xuchotl. The city was built long ago by another race that dwelt there for centuries doing little besides enjoying their leisure to the fullest. The present inhabitants arrived only half a century before, fleeing a revolution in their native land. A slave of the original rulers, Tolkemec, betrayed his masters and admitted the newcomers whom, though intellectually and technologically less advanced, nonetheless supplanted the architects of the city. Thus the new people came to rule a city they only dimly understood.

The newcomers to Xuchotl were led by two brothers, Tecuhltli and Xotalanc, and by Tolkemec. They took over different areas of the city and for awhile lived in peace. However, a feud between the brothers began when Tecuhltli stole Xotalanc's bride. Tolkemec aided and betrayed both sides for his own purposes, until hideously tortured and cast into the city's catacombs to die. This was twelve years ago. Since that time, the blood-feud has dominated all life in the city.

Now what? Does the party wish to leave? Olmec and Tascela wish them to stay; both lust for Valeria (and perhaps any other comely female in the group) and Olmec wishes their help to overcome their enemies. In return, he will offer to have his men re-learn the use of the bow and help the party reach the coast dealing with the dragon-gods with poisoned arrows. Additionally, he offers gems as “common as cobblestones” in the outer world.

Once the deal is made, party members are escorted to their individual private chambers. Techotl will linger awhile with the party, basking in their god-like glow and the fact that he was the guide who brought them hither. Should the party wish to ask questions his answers are below:

Tell us about the Tecuhltli:

Like the rest of the city, Tecuhltli contains four stories, or tiers of chambers, with towers jutting up from the roof. Each tier is named; indeed, the people of Xuchotl has a name for each chamber, hall, and stair in the city, as people of more normal cities designate streets and quarters. In Tecuhltli the floors are named The Eagle's Tier, The Ape's Tier, The Tiger's Tier and The Serpent's Tier, in the order as enumerated, The Eagle's Tier being the highest, or fourth, floor.

Who is this Tascela?

Techotl shuddered and glances furtively about him before answering.

“She is—Tascela! She was the wife of Xotalanc—the woman Tecuhltli stole, to start the feud.”

[Have characters roll an INT check at -2. Success means they have pieced the years together and she looks much younger than the 50+ years she should look like.]

“She was a full-grown woman when the Tlazitlans [Ta la zit lans] journeyed from Lake Zuad. It was because the king of Stygia desired her for a concubine that Xotalanc and his brother rebelled and fled into the wilderness. She is a witch who possesses the secret of perpetual youth.”

Part 4: Scent of Black Lotus

Yasala, Tascela's servant, tries to sneak into Valeria's room (or the most Comely female's) and drug her with Black Lotus. The would-be victim must make a PER/2 rounded down check (PER if the victim has Light Sleeper) or be oblivious to the entry of Yasala. Then, if she fails the poison save at -3, she is taken captive and comes up simply missing when the attack comes in another hour. Otherwise, Yasala can be dealt with in any way the character wishes, but she fears her mistress more than the character and will not tell any truth.

Part 5: Twenty Red Nails

With the balance of power shifted to the Tecuhltli, the Xotalanc have decided to amass a final confrontation, an all or nothing assault.

Xotalanc Warriors (20) (AC:8 HD:2+3 hp:16 Th:17 D:d8+1 SA: SD: Mv:12 S:M ML:16 EX:150)

The battle will last 12 rounds and each character will have 1-3 adversaries at once.

When the battle is over, Olmec will suggest that half the party travel to Xotalanc to see if any others still survive there, and the other half stay to help protect the few who remain (only 15). He will conveniently ask the strongest fighters to leave and suggest the comeliest female stay for he has ulterior plans.

Olmec will provide an escort of two men per party member going to Xotalanc. He will secretly tell them to slay them after investigating Xotalanc.

Upon reaching the city of Xotalanc, they party finds it empty of folk (so their trip was for naught), but they do find a grim memorial to the decades of feud:

Ranged along the wall behind the dais are rows of glass-covered shelves. And on those shelves hundreds of human heads, perfectly preserved, stare at you with emotionless eyes, as they had stared for only the gods knew how many months and years. A Tecuhltli named Yanath points to the ghastly relics with a twitching finger.

“There's my brother's head!” He murmurs. “And there is my father's younger brother! And there beyond them is my sister's eldest son!” Suddenly he begins to weep, dry-eyed, with harsh, loud sobs that shake his frame. He does not take his eyes from the heads. His sobs grow shriller, changing to frightful, high-pitched laughter, and that in turn becomes an unbearable screaming. Yanath seems stark mad. Suddenly, he begins a low moan, and it rises in pitch and volume. When it reaches its apex,

he wildly swings his sword!

The other warriors stare in amazement as Yanath must be put down. They will wait to attack until the trip home when the party is not so cautious.

Part 6: The Eyes of Tascela

While half the party is gone to Xotalanc, the following happens:

1. First, any party members who stay behind will be drugged to sleep and then bound. Tascela creates a potent drug to be mixed with the fruit drink and served by the women of Tecuhtli. Save at -4 (poison) or fall comatose for 2d4 turns.
2. Olmec attempts to bed the comeliest female but will content himself with the second comeliest if she is at least a 15 COM. If there is but one such female, Olmec's desires will conflict with Tascela's, so she will have Olmec bound upon the Wheel of Torture (see description below) using the remaining Tecuhtli if needed for they are loyal to her over Olmec.
3. Tascela wishes to take Valeria (or the comeliest female) to her dungeon, stealing her life essence to perpetuate her eternal youth and beauty. Tascela's ritual to steal the life-essence involves an orgiastic ritual; the entire process takes 3 turns during which time, the victim is bound on an altar.
4. Techotl will attempt to stop either royalty and may pay with his life.
5. If Olmec is tortured, the characters who left for Xotalanc will arrive in time to save him if they wish.
6. Olmec will eventually try to betray the party again if they do save him.

When the Xotalanc party returns, they find Olmec on the Wheel of Death, so read the following:

Returning to Tecuhtli with fire in your eyes, you find the place disconcertingly quiet. Passing a room, you glance in and stare at a weird scene. In the room into which you are looking, a low rack-like frame of iron lay on the floor, and a large figure is bound prostrate upon it. His head rests on a bed of iron spikes, which are already crimson-pointed with blood where they have pierced his scalp. A peculiar harness-like contrivance is fastened about his head, though in such a manner that the leather band does not protect his scalp from the spikes. This harness is connected by a slender chain to the mechanism that upholds a huge iron ball which is suspended above the captive's hairy breast. As long as the man can force himself to remain motionless, the iron ball hangs in its place. But when the pain of the iron points causes him to lift his head, the ball lurches downward a few inches. Presently his aching neck muscles will no longer support his head in its unnatural position and it will fall back on the spikes again. It is obvious that eventually the ball will crush him to a pulp, slowly and inexorably. The victim is gagged, and above the gag his great black ox-eyes roll wildly toward you. The man on the rack is Olmec, Prince of Tecuhtli!

Olmec's only leverage is that he knows exactly where the other party members are as well as the comely female party member is and that she is in mortal danger. He promises to take them there—all this assuming they un-gag him first.

Part 7: He Comes from the Dark

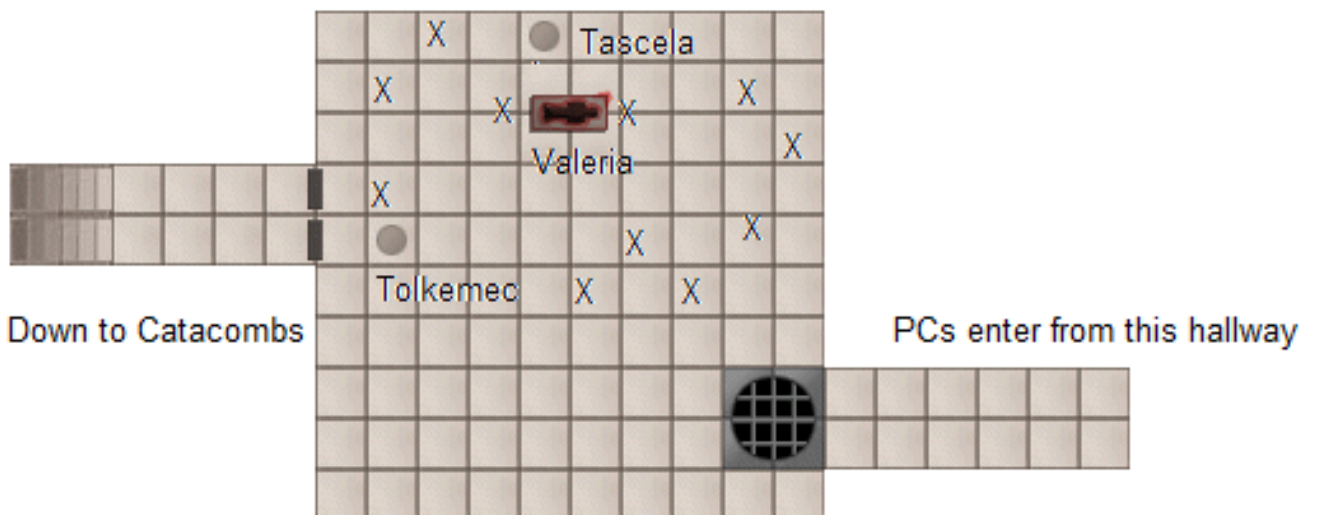
When the party arrives at the chamber of sacrifice...

There are thirteen people in the room besides yourselves. The first person you see is Valeria. A curious black altar stands before the throne-dais. Ranged about it, seven black candles in golden candlesticks send up oozing spirals of thick green smoke, disturbingly scented. These spirals unite in a cloud near the ceiling, forming a smoky arch above the altar. On that altar lies Valeria, stark naked, her white flesh gleaming in shocking contrast to the glistening ebon stone. She is not bound. She lies at full length, her arms stretch out above her head to their fullest extent. At the head of the altar kneels a young man, holding her wrists firmly. A young woman kneels at the other end of the altar, grasping her ankles. Between them she can neither rise nor move. [Show “Figure 4: The Sacrifice”]

Nine men and women of Tecuhltli kneel dumbly in a semicircle, watching the scene with hot, lustful eyes. On the ivory throne-seat Tascela lolls. Bronze bowls of incense roll their spirals about her; the wisps of smoke curl about her naked limbs like caressing fingers. She cannot sit still; she squirms and shifts about with sensuous abandon, as if finding pleasure in the contact of the smooth ivory with her sleek flesh.

All this you take in with a sweep of vision, but in a flash, steel comes crashing in around you!

Steel cage traps have been placed above the entrances to the room in case the party breaks in on the ritual. Only the first three in line have to save vs paralyzation to avoid the trap. Avoiding the trap means either dropping back from whence they came, or rolling forward. Since the cage is a bit long and rectangular, characters who roll forward will still find themselves within the cage. However, they will only have to Bend Bars once to get through while those who fail will first have to Bend Bars just to first enter the cage, then exit the other side with another Bend Bars.



While the characters are caught, (for at least a couple of rounds while they strain at the bars) read the following, unless Tascela is directly hit with a spell or missile weapon:

“Your life shall make me young, white woman!” Tascela says. “I shall lean upon your bosom and place my lips over you, and slowly—ah, slowly! --sink this blade through your heart, so that your life, fleeing your stiffening body, shall enter mine, making me bloom again with youth and with life everlasting!”

Slowly, like a serpent arching toward its victim, she bends down through the writhing smoke, closer and closer over the now motionless woman who stares up into her glowing dark eyes—eyes that grow larger and deeper, blazing like black moons in the swirling smoke.

[After the characters escape the cage, or 3 rounds after the cage drops, whichever comes first, read the following]

All eyes are glued on the altar and the white figure there; the crash of a thunderbolt could hardly have broken the spell, yet it is only a low cry that shatters the fixity of the scene and brings all whirling about—a low cry, yet one to make the hair stand up stiffly on the scalp, All look, and all see.

Framed in the door to the left of the dais stands a nightmare figure. It is a man, with a tangle of white hair and a matted white beard that falls over his breast. Rags only partly cover his gaunt frame, revealing half-naked limbs strangely unnatural in appearance. The skin is not that of a normal human. There is a suggestion of *scaliness* about it, as if the owner has dwelt long under conditions almost antithetical to those conditions under which human life ordinarily thrives. And there is nothing at all human about the eyes that blaze from the tangle of white hair. They are great gleaming discs that stare unwinkingly: luminous, whitish, and without a hint of normal emotion or sanity. The mouth gapes, but no coherent words issue--only a high-pitched tittering.

“Tolkemec!’ whispers Tascela, livid, while the others crouch in speechless horror. ‘No myth, then, no ghost! Set! You have dwelt for twelve years in darkness! Twelve years among the bones of the dead! What grisly food did you find? What mad travesty of life did you live, in the stark blackness of that eternal night?’”

Only a hideous laughter is her reply. Lifting a green wand with a crystal tip in his hand he points and a blackish-green beam shoots from its tip...

Tolkemec is insane, and there is NO method in his madness. He will randomly attempt to hit one of the PCs, Olmec, Tascela or one of the 11 Tecuhltians with his Wand of Ghostly Fear. Valeria is immune as she is lying on the altar. However, if one of the Tecuhltians who is holding either her arms or legs is hit, Valeria will free herself and try to find a weapon to join the fray. It may be best to have miniatures for if one person Saves vs Wands to avoid being hit, another behind that target may get hit instead (Save vs Wands -2, etc).

Tascela will concentrate on anyone who seems to threaten her. If no one, she will focus on the mad Tolkemec.

Olmec will be enraged at Tascela for his torture and near death. He will not harm the Tecuhltians, however, and if Tascela and Tolkemec die, he will rally any of them still left against the PCs.

The **Tecuhltians** are too surprised at Tolkemec's appearance to fight and after 1 round of being paralyzed with fear, will madly run around, or even escape via the cage if the bars have been bent and PCs are through it.

Part 8: Epilogue

If any Tecuhltians survive, and Olmec, Tascela and the wight are dead, they will surrender and assist the characters in gathering some gems and leaving the city. It is up to you if you want to roleplaying facing the terrain and possible dragon-gods etc. or if they just ride off deeper into Zingara seeking their next adventure.

If they escape with their lives, award PCs with Xps or if you use a simplified system like I do, this adventure should be worth 1/3 of a level for each 4 hour playing session (but no more than 1 level per adventure in any case).

I also keep track and award the following bonuses, one per PC, each worth 1/10 of a level:

1. Most Damage in a single blow/spell
2. Coolest Critical Hit by a PC
3. Weirdest/Funniest Happening
4. Scribe (one player must write all notes including monsters killed and treasure gained)
5. BID if she is alive and relatively unharmed
6. Best Idea

NPC Characters

Princess Tascela, 10th Level Enchantress

(AC:5 (dex 4; ROP 1) HD:10 hp:40 Th: 18 Mod Th: 13 (dagger) D: weapon+8 SA: spells SD: spells Mv:12 S:M ML:14 EX:5000)

S: 18/00 I: 16 W: 15 D: 18 C: 12 Ch: 17 Com: 18 P: 14

Headband ROP+1 (400sp) saves vs first wand attack, physical attack, mind attack, petrification attack; each magical save is attuned to a gem which grows gray when used up

Tecpatl +2 (dagger)

Spells: 1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th
Charm	Blur	Suggestion	Reduce	Life Force Transfer
ShockGrasp	RayofEnfee	DispelMagic	PhanKiller	Telekinesis
Shield	Scare	HoldPerson	Confusion	Domination
Hypnotism	MirrorImage	Slow		
BurnHands	Blindness			
ProtfromGood				

Prince Olmec, 6th Fighter

(AC:5 HD:6 hp: 52 Th:9 D:d8+7 SA: SD: Mv:12 S:M ML: EX:3000)

S: 18/76 I: 12 W: 14 D: 15 C: 18 Ch: 16 Com: 12 P: 13

Macuahuitl +3 (club with obsidian blades run through it)

Robe of Scintillating Colors: can give 40' rd light, every rd of combat after 1st -1 AC

Tolkemec, 12th Wight Lord

(AC:6 HD:12 hp:85 Th:7 D:d8+3 SA: 1 level drain/touch SD: undead immunities Mv:12 S:M ML:20 EX:2000)

Wand of Ghostly Fear: ages victim d4X10 years; 22 charges

Xotalanc Warriors

(AC:8 HD:2+3 hp:16 Th:17 D:d8+1 SA: SD: Mv:12 S:M ML:12 EX:150)

Tecuhltli Warriors

(AC:7 HD:2 hp:13 Th:17 D:d8+1 SA: SD: Mv:12 S:M ML:14 EX:150)

Valeria, 8th Warrior

(AC: 4 HD: 8 hp: 56 Th: 10 D: d8+2 SA: SD: Mv:12 S: M ML: 15)

S: 16 I: 14 W: 12 D: 18 C: 15 Ch: 16 Com: 17 P: 14

Leather; short sword, dagger

Figure 0: World Map---Red Nails



Figure 1: The Giant Lizard Beast



Figure 2: Olmec and the Court



Figure 3: The Sacrifice



Figure 4: The Return of Tolkemec





