

# The City of Skulls

By Wesley Connally

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This series of 12 adventures that I created are all based on Robert E. Howard's Conan 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.

Levels: 5-7

**Reputation:** 10, Hyrkania, 10 Turan (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 are escorting King Yildez's daughter, Zosara, to the Khan of the Kuigar Tribe when they are attacked and eventually taken hostage. They arrive at the City of Skulls in the Talakma mountains, an ancient and forbidden city where they are sold as slaves and put on a slaver's ship. Escaping, they return to the City of Skulls in time to stop the wedding between Zosara and the ruler of the forbidden city.

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 applies 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..."

The soon-to-be BID has already taken a fancy to one of the character's before the adventure has begun. Roll for the BID.

Howling like wolves, a horde of squat, brown warriors swept down upon the Turanian troop from the foothills of the Talakma Mountains, where the hills flattened out into the broad, barren steppes of Hyrkania. The attack came at sunset. The western horizon streamed with scarlet banners, while to the south the invisible sun tinged the snows of the higher peaks with red.

For 15 days, the escort of Turanians have jogged across the plain, fording the chill waters of the Zaporoska River, venturing deeper and ever deeper into the illimitable distances of the East. Then, without warning, came the attack.

The commander of the escort, Prince Ardashir, thunders commands from atop his mighty stallion. He wheels his horse back and forth to keep between the foe and the horse-litter which bares his charge. This is Yildiz's daughter, Zosara. The troop is escorting the princess to her wedding with Kujula, the Great Khan of the Kuigar nomads.

Even as you watch, you see Prince Ardashir clutch at his fur-cloaked chest. As if conjured up by magic, a black arrow has sprouted suddenly from his gemmed gorget. The prince gapes at the shaft; then, stiff, as a statue, he topples from horseback, his jewel-cruled, spiked helmet falls into the blood-spotted snow.

[Azweri Archers on horseback (101) (AC:5 HD:2 hp:14 Mv:18 Th:15 D:d6+1 SA:overrun SD: Sz:5'4 XP:85)]

It is important that the players are taken prisoner, along with a d10+3 Turanians and Zosara. Allow some players to escape if they run and are lucky and smart, but Zosara must be bait along with some party members. All of the character's equipment will be taken and most likely never returned unless a lot of strategy and persistence is exerted.

### Part One: Cup of the Gods

You stand on the northern slopes of the Talakmas, several miles south of the site of the battle. Stocky brown warriors in lacquered leather, many with bandaged wounds, surround you. You find that your wrists are stoutly manacled, and that massive iron chains link the manacles. The princess, in silken coat and trousers, is also fettered; but her chains and fetters are much lighter and seem to be made of solid silver.

As the spears of the Azweri, as your captors are called, nudge you with frequent pricks between their shoulders, the litter of the princess sways between its two horses in the middle of the column. You note that the commander of the Azwei troop treats Zosara with respect; she does not appear to have been physically harmed. This chieftain does not seem to bear any grudge against you for the havoc you wrought among his men, the death and wounds you have dealt.

"You damn good fighters!" he says with a grin in broken Hyrkanian.

Allow players to take an action at this time if they wish.

For two days you wend over a devious trail through the heart of the mountain range. You cross passes where you have to plow through deep snow, still unmelted from the previous winter. Here the breath comes short from the altitude, and sudden storms whip your ragged garments and drive stinging particles of snow and hail against your faces.

Ambush! The party is attacked guerrilla warfare style by Azweri enemies. Characters are bound with 1 foot of slack for hands, 2.5 for feet. Each character must contend with 4 rounds of opponents.

[Warrior (AC 8 HD 1 hp 6 Th 19 Mv 12 D d6 XP 100) spear buckler]

You come forth on the southern slopes of the Talakmas at last, to look upon a fantastic sight—a vast, green valley that slopes down and away before you. It is as if you stand on the lip of a stupendous dish. Below you, little clouds creep over leagues of dense, green jungle. In the midst of this jungle, a great lake or inland sea reflects the azure of the clear, bright sky.

Beyond this body of water, the green continues on until it is lost in a distant purple base. And above the haze, jagged and white, standing out sharply against the blue, rises the peaks of the mighty Himelias, hundreds of miles further south.

The officer speaks “You are in the valley of Meru. You go to great city Shamballah”

Each character takes 2d6 damage from wear and 1d6 CON damage from the two-day journey.

Down you go, into the stupendous depression. The air grows warmer; the vegetation, denser. By the end of the day you are slogging through a land of steaming jungle warmth and swampy forest, which overhang the road in dense masses of somber dark green, relieved by the brilliant blossoms of flowering trees. Bright-hued birds sing and screech. Monkeys chatter in the trees. Insects buzz and bite. Snakes and lizards slither out of the path of the party. Finally, you site the walls, domes, and spires of a city of rose-red stone, standing amid fields and paddies between the jungle and the sea.

The gates of the city are fashioned of bronze, green with age and cast in the likeness of a gigantic, horned human skull. Square, barred windows above the portal make the skull's eye sockets, while below you, the barred grill of the portcullis grins at you like the teeth in fleshless jaws. Here everything is hewn and carved from rose-pink stone. The architecture is ornate, cluttered with sculpture and friezes swarming with demons and monsters and many-armed gods. Everywhere you look, you see carving in the form of human skulls. They are set into the lintels over doorways. They hang on golden chains about the yellow-brown necks of the Meruvians, whose only other garment, both for men and for women, is a short skirt.

The temple of the god-king looms before you. It consists of one gigantic cone or spire, tapering up from a squat, circular base. Made entirely of red stone, the round tower wall climbs upwards in a spiral, like that of some curious, conical sea-shell. On each stone of the spiral parapet is graven the likeness of a human skull. The temple gives the impression of a tremendous tower made of death's heads.

You enter the throne room. The throne itself which rests atop a dais of black marble, is all of one huge piece of pale jade, carved into the likeness of ropes and chains of skulls, fantastically looped and interwoven. Upon this greenish-white chair of death sits the half-divine monarch. The rimpoché, Jalung Thongpa is very short and fat, with scrawny bow legs that scarcely reach the floor. His huge belly is swathed in a sash of cloth-of-gold, which blaze with gems. His naked arms, swollen with flabby fat, are clasped by a dozen golden armllets, and jeweled rings flashing and winking on his pudgy fingers.

The bald head that lolls on top of his misshapen body is notably ugly, with dangling dewlaps,

pendulous lips, and crooked, discolored teeth. The head is topped by a spired helmet of solid gold, blazing with rubies. One side of his face does not match the other. One half hangs slackly from the bone and bares a blank, filmed eye, while the other eye is bright with the glint of malicious intelligence.

Beside the throne stands a tall, gaunt man in the scarlet robes of a Meruvian priest. Beneath his shaven pate, cold green eyes look out upon the scene with icy contempt.

Jalung Thongpa looks with lustful eyes upon Zosara, issues a command, and she is whisked away. She gives one quick panicked furtive glance in your direction before disappearing through a curtained doorway. Foreign words are exchanged but you get the sense that the Azweri officer is retelling the tale of your fight, capture and journey. Jalung nods in understanding, then after a pause barks another command. You are forcefully shuffled against the wall.

The Azweri officer tells you, "I tell him you good fighters! If you beat prisoner you not die like pigs! You be sold into slavery!" He smiles the smile of one expecting thanks. Then turns and barks orders to his men. No more than a minute passes before prisoners form a chain gang opposite your wall. One is led to the middle of the large room, hands chained together with two feet of slack not unlike yours. And he is then given a tulwar and buckler. The warden grabs one of your Turanian comrades, pushing him towards the middle. The warden reaches down to unlock the fetters that restrain his feet from moving more than two and a half feet apart, but a grunt and head shake from Jalung Thongpa arrests that brightening prospect. Then without further ado, he claps his hands and the prisoner lunges! The Turanian was about to protest the fact that he was given no weapon, and was thus taken by surprise. In two heartbeat's time, the tulwar penetrates his chest and protrudes a hand's breadth on the other side. The Turanian slumps in a pool of blood.

Each character must defeat a prisoner or die trying. Characters are hampered by the chains they wear (-2 DEX, -3 to hit, and ½ move). Roll a d3 to see what level of prisoner they fight.

[Prisoner (AC:9 HD:1/2/3 hp:6/12/18 Mv:12 Th:19/18/17 D:d8+1/2/3 SD: Sz:5'7 XP:100/200/300)]

## Part Two: The Ship of Blood

Above all, it is hot and it stinks. The dead, vitiated air of the dungeon is stale. It reeks with the stench of close-packed, sweating bodies. A score of naked men are crammed into one filthy hole, surrounded on all sides by huge blocks of stone weighing many tons. Many are small, brown Meruvians, who sprawl about, listless and apathetic. There are a handful of the squat, slant-eyed little warriors who guarded the sacred valley, the Azweri. There are a couple of hawk-nosed Hyrkanians as well.

Three days later, the overseers in black leather stride among the slaves, wielding heavy whips and herding their charges out the door. "Now," sneers one, "we shall see what prices the princes of the Sacred Land will pay for your unwieldy carcasses, outland swine!"

For a d6 days, the survivors are held in the dank, stinky prisons. They gain back ½ a CON point rounded down per day, but take another 3d4 damage and d4 CON.

After the auction, you are led to a great galley, which lays moored against the sun. The galley is low through the waist, where the slaves labor; the rail is only a few feet above the water. It is higher in the

bow, where the seamen berth, and in the carved and gilded stern, where the officers have their quarters. A single mast arises amidships. The yard of the single triangular sail, and the furled sail itself, lies along the catwalk over the oar pit.

On the galley, your feet are not fettered. But you each wear a pair of manacles joined by a chain, and this chain is strung through an iron ring looped around the loom of the oar. Although this ring slides freely along the loom, its travel is stopped at the outer end by the oarlock and, at the inner, by a collar or ferrule of lead. This collar, securely fastened to the butt end of the oar by an iron spike, acts as a counterweight to the blade of the oar.

Players with Gather Information skill, or thieves, can make a skill check to learn about Shamballah. Otherwise, a Charisma check can allow each player to learn a random, and perhaps redundant piece of information.

- You learn from others whom you can understand, that the ship makes a circuit, traveling to each of the 7 sacred cities of Meru: Shondakor, Thogara, Auzakia, Issedon, Paliana, Throana, and then back to Shamballah.
- A hulking horror lurks beneath the temple of Shamballah.
- The god-king can summon his father
- The wedding should take place in the temple.
- The story of how the god of demons created the bowl and why there is unswerving loyalty to the rimpoche.

How the God of Demons created the bowl is a story revered by the people. Once the gods carved out this bowl for the people to live in and all was well until they disrespected the leader of the Meruvians, the god-king. Terrible drought and frost invaded the land. In repentance, the people promised to always obey the rimpoche unswervingly and to accept their fate regardless of the consequences.

If the players develop a plan quickly and make their escape, they will not have far to travel to go back to Shamballah. If they are delayed, they can make their attempt when the ship travels back to the capital city in 7 days. In any case, they arrive in time to stop the wedding.

The ship has a crew of 6 and a Captain, and their pattern is to pull into port and rotate their shore leave. Three members go into town whilst three guard the ship. After a leave of 3 hours, they switch places. The Captain leaves for all 6 hours and even (50%) sleeps in town if he finds a good woman. Then the ship is made ready for the next day's voyage to the next port a day's rowing away. The crew is allowed a stretch when first pulling into port and before nightfall for 20 minutes. The crew only allows this when all 7 are present.

**Ship Crew (AC:6 (leather and DEX) HD:3 hp:20 Mv:12 Th:16 D:3/2 d6 SA: SD: Sz:M XP:180)**

**Captain (AC: 5 (leather and DEX) HD:5 hp:35 Mv:12 Th:14 D:d6+2/d6+2 SA: SD: Sz:M XP:480)**

Eventually, any good plan should have a reasonable chance of escape. In the short story, Conan uses his massive strength to break his oar in half, sliding it out of its collar, and clubbing the overseer with it. Then the chains were pulled through the collar loops. He then dives into the sea for his escape and swims back to Shamballah.

If the characters swim to safety, they must make anywhere from 1 to 3 swim checks (1 if they escape close to port, 2 or 3 (random) otherwise. Characters only have a base chance to make it if they do not have the swimming proficiency (which is a 4 plus ST proficiency modifiers since I start ALL non-weapon proficiencies at 8).

### Part Three: Tunnels of Doom

After the characters make their escape, and swim to shore, swim check required, they spy an underground storm sewer leading into the heart of the city, PER check applicable. If unsuccessful, must make another swim check.

If the players can remember hearing the rumor about the monster, if they can find the monster, they know that they are near the temple above.

Seemingly from the wall itself springs an ancient monstrosity. Its huge bulk is black and muscles bulged from beneath its scaly hide. Its neckless head sports two large mandibles, each the size of a man's forearm. Giant claws on massive arms rise to strike.

[Umber Hulk (AC:2 HD:8+8 hp:56 Mv:6 Th:11 D:3d4/3d4/1d10 SA:confusion SD: Sz:8'X5' XP:4000)

The umber hulk gets -5 for surprise. It has built a network a smaller tunnels and dead ends in its lair.]

The Umber Hulk's treasure heap is within site of the initial attack if players spot it.

19 arrows +1	Long sword, fair	Belt, good
Shortsword, poor	Staff Sling, good	Long Bow, fair
Hand Axe, excellent	Scale Mail, good	Broad Sword, poor
Quiver, excellent	Footman's mace, poor	Studded Leather, good
Chain mail, poor	Footman's pick, poor	Blowgun, fair
7 sling bullets	Splint Mail, fair	2 Needles
Hide armor, poor	Club, poor	
Grappling hook, good	2 Spears, good	

Many coins can be seen strewn about the big pile of debris and refuse. It would take many hours to collect several hundred coins and there is a wedding to prevent! On a roll of 1 on a d10, characters can find a gem quickly.

This hoard is a chance to equip the players with a weapon and some protection. Feel free to adjust the weapons to ones suited to the character's proficiencies. Or don't, and make that fighter who put all his weapon proficiencies into one basket pay.

A lever releases a portion of the wall which leads to a sloping passage up to another bolted door (remember it's dark). Beyond the door:

You stand on an ornamental balcony crowded with statues of gods or demons in a huge, octagonal temple. The walls of the eight-sided chamber soar upward, past the balcony, to curve inward and meet to form an eight-sided dome. You remember seeing such a dome towering among the lesser buildings

of the city.

Below at one side of the octagonal floor, a colossal statue stands on a plinth of black marble, facing an altar in the exact center of the chamber. The statue dwarfs everything else in the chamber. Rising thirty feet high, its loins are on level with the balcony on which you stand. It is a gigantic idol of a green stone that looks like jade, although never has men found true jade in so large a mass. It has six arms, and the eyes in its scowling face are immense rubies.

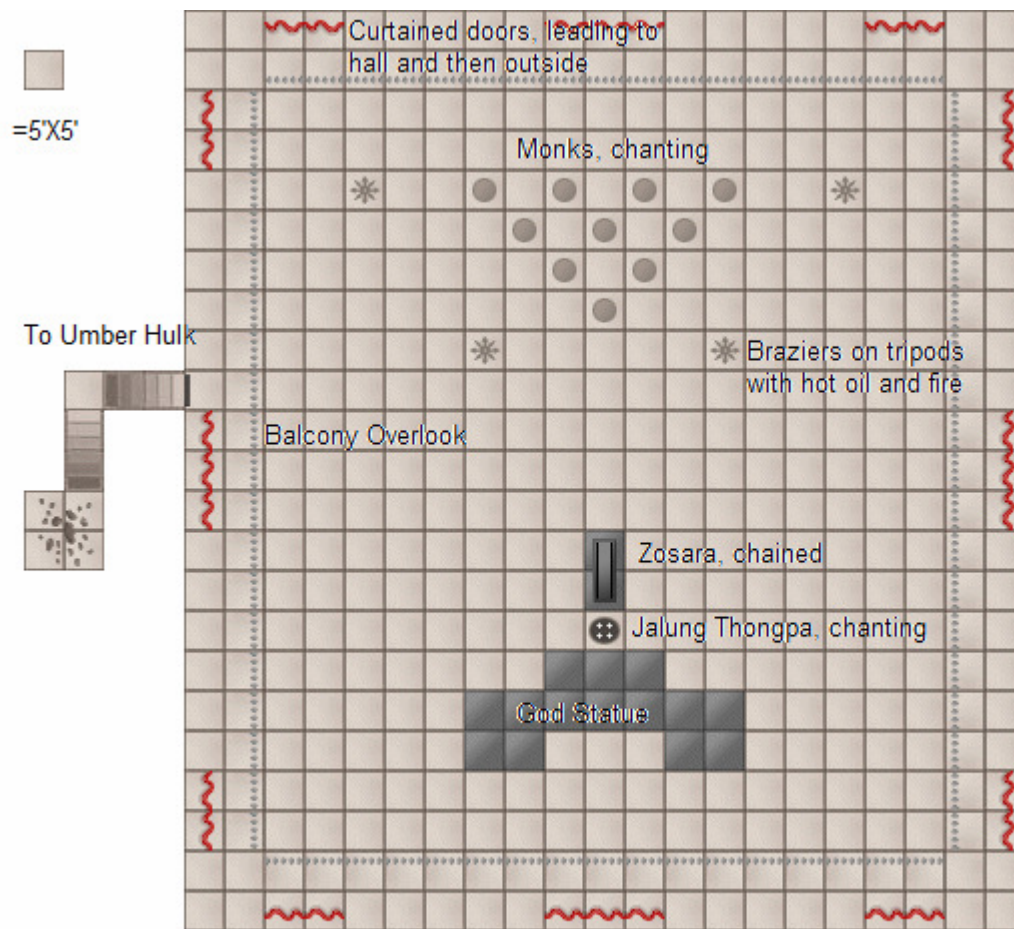
Facing the statue across the altar stands a throne of skulls, like that which you had already seen in the throne room. The toadlike little god-king of Meru is seated on this throne. As you glance from the idol's head to that of the ruler, you think that you see the hint of similarity between the two.

The rimpoche is engaged in a ritual. Shamans in scarlet robes kneel in ranks around the throne and the altar, chanting ancient prayers and spells. Beyond them, against the walls of the chamber, several rows of Meruvians sit cross-legged on the marble pavement. From the richness of their jewels and their ornate if scanty apparel, they appear to be the officials and the nobility of the kingdom. Above their heads, set in wall brackets around the balcony, a hundred torches flicker and smoke. On the floor of the chamber, stands four torcheres, each crowned by the rich golden flame of a butter lamp. The four flames waver and sputter.

On the altar between the throne and the colossus lays the naked, white, slender body of a young girl, held to the altar by slender golden chains. It is Zosara.

[Shaman (10) (AC:8 (4 w/barkskin) HD:3 hp:21 Mv:12 Th:15 D:d6 SA:open hand stun on 18 SD: Sz:M XP:350) CLWX3, Barkskin, Spiritual Hammer]

The nobles run away at first conflict.



## Shamballah Temple Ground Floor

### Part Four: When the Green God Wakes

Assuming the characters interrupt the wedding ritual, the rampoche begins to summon his “father.” It takes the god-king 4 rounds to invoke the statue to life.

The green stone shifts one of its huge feet slowly, creakingly. Thirty feet above your heads, its great face leers down you. The six arms move jerkily, flexing like the limbs of some gigantic spider. The thing tilts, shifting its monstrous weight.

[God Statue: (AC:1 HD:46 hp:400 Mv:6 (but reach is 20') Th:1 D:10d10 SA: SD: Sz:30' XP:28,000)]

Remember, that if a character is hit and somehow miraculously survives, most likely a system shock roll will be required due to loss of >50% of total hp.

Characters at this level are not exactly expected to defeat the God Statue. Like many adversaries in the Conan adventures, some monsters should simply be avoided. But giving partial xps based on % of damage is suggested.

The sane plan would be to nab Zosara killing as many priests and Jalung Thongpa if they can along the way. Doors in the temple room lead outside after a short hallway. The nobles have spread panic crying out “infidels have desecrated the temple and that the gods will arrive to punish everyone!” (false but



handy for the characters). If the characters can make it back outside the temple, they should have no problem escaping the city in the confusion though reclaiming their material possessions should be quite impossible.

## Part Five: Epilogue

A month later, you ride into the camp of Kujula, the Great Khan of the Kuigar nomads. Your appearance is entirely different from what it had been when you fled from Shamballah. In the villages on the southern slopes of the Talakmas, you traded and procured clothing suitable to snowy mountain passes and gusty plains. You wear fur caps, sheepskin coats, baggy trousers of coarse wool, and stout boots. When you present Zosara to her black-bearded groom, the khan feasts, praises and rewards you. Each character is also given a woman for each day there. After a carousal that lasts for several days, he sends you back to Turan loaded with gifts of gold.

If the character who has the BID asks, Zosara is more than happy to give herself to him on every cold night on their way to the Khan. It is expected that having been previously married, Zosara, is not a virgin.

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  $\frac{1}{2}$  level for each PC, +/-  $\frac{1}{4}$  level based on roleplaying, time to complete adventure (the longer, usually the more XPs)

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

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