

# XUTHAL OF THE DUSK

by Robert E. Howard

transcribed for the screen by Steve Block

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version d

FADE IN:

P.O.V. VIEW FROM SPACE

The Earth as seen from near space, as if from a satellite camera, to the accompaniment of a march, with emphasis on drums, trumpets, and deep-toned horns, suggesting the relentless tread of sandaled feet. Clouds are carefully arranged to avoid obscuring continental outlines and other necessary details. As continental Europe rotates into view, the Voiceover begins, and Europe slowly begins to morph into Robert E. Howard's map of Hyborea; an ice age intervenes; when the glaciers clear, we see the continental outlines of the Hyborean Age.

VOICEOVER

Know, O Prince, that between the years when the oceans drank Atlantis and the gleaming cities, and the years of the rise of the Sons of Aryas, there was an Age undreamed of,

(the morphing is complete)

when shining kingdoms lay spread across the world like blue mantles beneath the stars

(the continent darkens, as if by nightfall; points of light spring into being, one by one, representing the major Hyborian capitals, in the order given)

Nemedia, Ophir, Brythunia, Hyperborea, Zamora with its dark-haired women and towers of spider-haunted mystery, Zingara with its chivalry, Koth that bordered on the pastoral lands of Shem, Stygia with its shadow-guarded tombs, Hyrkania whose riders wore steel and silk and gold. But the proudest kingdom of the world was Aquilonia,

(the view brightens again)

reigning supreme in the dreaming west

(all the capitals fade by "daylight",  
except Tarantia)

Hither came Conan the Cimmerian,  
(music builds to crescendo; partial fade to  
closeup of Conan, black-haired, sullen-  
eyed, sword in hand.)

Thief,  
(Cut to Conan plucking jewel from an idol.)

Reaver,  
(Cut to Conan in battle in full armor.)

Hero,  
(Cut to Conan, semi-armored, freeing bound  
maiden from altar.)

With deep melancholies and gigantic mirth,  
(partial fade to a Conan laughing in  
raucous tavern-fight, then back to the  
map.)

To tread the jeweled thrones of the Earth  
under his sandalled feet.

(The POV starts to zoom towards the  
southern part of the Hyborean  
continent, zooming down towards Koth,  
and then further south into Shem.)

Conan the mercenary soldier has enlisted in  
the army of Almuric, a rebel prince of  
Koth, and when Almuric was defeated and  
driven southward into Shem, Conan stayed  
with that mad, motley horde.

(The POV fades to show Conan, in  
battered armor, fleeing on horseback  
with a large disorganized group of  
several hundred mounted fellow  
soldiers, amid obscuring clouds of  
dust. In the distance behind Conan,  
further obscured by yet more dust,  
Kothic heavy cavalry slaughters yet  
more of Conan's comrades, mostly  
infantry.)

Almuric's army fled southward through the  
Shemite city-states, storming cities,  
making new enemies, but always driven by  
the vengeful Kothians, never able to stop,  
rest, or re-organize. In one such city . .

FADE TO:

EXTERIOR: SHEM -- CITY-STATE OF NIPPOR -- CITY STREET -- DAY.

Conan is riding down a sun-baked city street, accompanied by several other soldiers also on horseback. They and their horses are dusty and battle-stained, their armor battered and bloodstained. Mud brick buildings (shops, houses, etc) line the street. Pedestrians surreptitiously glare at the horsemen with suppressed resentment.

METROS, one of CONAN'S fellow soldiers, turns in his saddle to speak to Conan.

METROS

It's a pity Nippur surrendered so quickly. Now Almuric has forbidden us from sacking and looting them.

CONAN

Well, I think that they'll be cooperative enough if we phrase our demands politely.

They are passing the Slave Market, where a transaction is in progress. A Slaver is trying to make a sale to a greasy-looking Shemite Nobleman; the subject of the transaction is NATALA, a lithe, curvy blonde girl. She is trying to suppress her fear and revulsion as the Nobleman prods her flesh to test for firmness.

SLAVER

She can cook and clean, and will make a nice addition to your harem. And look at that hair!

NOBLEMAN

My other concubines will appreciate having a foreign slave around the house to do some of their work for them.

Natala shudders and cringes.

Conan frowns, and nudges his horse over to where the trio is standing.

CONAN

(falsely jovial enthusiasm)  
You've sold me. I'll take her.

NOBLEMAN

(indignant)  
I'm prepared to offer twenty shekels for her.

CONAN

(hand on sword, directing a hard grin at the Nobleman)

I'm prepared to spare your life if you get out of here and don't give me any trouble.

The Nobleman, discretion overpowering his anger, backs away, with an expression on his face that says 'I wasn't here, this isn't happening, nothing to see here.'

The Slaver, however, is angry at the loss of his property, and a profitable sale. His eyes glare, and he opens his mouth and takes a breath to protest.

CONAN

(Hand still on sword, directing a hard glare at the Slaver)

Don't test my generosity, Slaver!

The Slaver clamps his lips shut and fumes.

CONAN

(cont'd.)

Up you go, girl.

He leans over in his saddle, wraps an arm around Natala's torso, and straightens back up, easily lifting her up and into the saddle in front of him.

Natala gasps and looks around, looks at the slaver, looks at Conan, then decides that her situation has improved, and settles down.

Conan rejoins Metros in the street, and they proceed in their original direction, leaving the Slaver glaring after them.

METROS

(amused)

Polite?

CONAN

I was polite! And did you see how cooperative they were?

(turns to Natala)

And what will I do with you now, girl? Shall I return you to your family?

NATALA

My name is Natala.

(not very hopeful)

And my family lives in Brythunia. I was

kidnapped, and sold from slaver to slaver, until I ended up in this horrible place.

CONAN

(pause)

There's a vengeful Kothian army between us and Brythunia.

(pause)

They're out for our blood, and they're only a few days behind us. Almuric, our leader, won't try to hold a hostile town while the Kothians besiege us. We'll have to leave before they get here. Is there no safe place for you here?

NATALA

(distraught)

Oh, sir, please don't leave me here! They'll only enslave me again, and as a foreigner I'll be slaves! horribly mistreated, even by the other

CONAN

Didn't you hear me, girl? We're being pursued by an army that wants to exterminate us! We'll be riding hard, and fighting hard, with little or no chance to stop and rest.

NATALA

(desperate now)

Please take me with you! I'm strong, I can cook, and wash and mend your clothes, and...

(blushes)

and, I can ... help you relax at night...

CONAN

(throws his head back and laughs)

girl, How could I turn down an offer like that? Very well, you can come with me.

NATALA

My name is Natala.

CONAN

And my name is Conan.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

INTERIOR: SHEM -- NIPPOR -- A DARKENED BEDROOM -- NIGHT.

The room is illuminated by a single candle. Conan and Natala are in

bed. Conan is already naked to the waist, and is slowly and gently disrobing Natala. She is demure and submissive, but not unhappy; she starts to respond to Conan's wooing.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INTERIOR: SHEM -- NIPPOR -- AN EXPROPRIATED PALACE -- CONFERENCE HALL -- DAY.

The room has plastered walls painted with murals depicting battles and heroic deeds in a style resembling ancient Babylonian. It would look expensive and luxurious, but the fine furniture is shoved back against the walls, and the floor is littered with military gear and random detritus.

PRINCE ALMURIC, young, aristocratic-looking, but also looking tired and harried, is standing with his officers around a map table. Conan is among the officers. All, even Almuric himself, are dressed in battered, dusty, stained armor and clothing, although Almuric's was once of high quality. They are examining a parchment map whose curled edges are pinned to the table with random knives. One of Almuric's officers taps a spot on the map with his knife.

OFFICER

(grave)

The Royal Army will be here in another day, Your Highness.

ALMURIC

(Resigned but decisive)

Muster the troops out of the taverns, or wherever they are. We leave before dawn.

OFFICER

Where shall we go?

ALMURIC

We've worn out our welcome in Shem. We'll have to continue southward, ford the River Styx, and take our chances in Stygia.

Massive but silent disapproval from the officers. Their chances in Stygia are dismal indeed.

They start to gather up their gear and evacuate the room.

FADE TO:

INTERIOR: SHEM -- NIPPOR -- A DISORDERLY BEDROOM -- DAY.

Conan and Natala are hurriedly packing clothes and gear, basically just throwing stuff into bags and packs.

NATALA

(Without pausing in her work)  
Will things be better in Stygia?

CONAN

Hardly. At least in Shem, we had a chance because Shem isn't one single kingdom, just a lot of independent rival city-states who will cheerfully sit and watch somebody else ruin their neighbors. But that's why the Kothian army was able to follow us wherever we went: no one wanted to stop them. But Stygia is all one kingdom, and a powerful one at that. The Kothians won't follow us into Stygia. But to the Stygians, we'll just seem like a big band of brigands, and they will deal with us harshly.

NATALA

(Frustrated, she stops packing for a moment as she straightens up to express herself.)  
Why do you keep following Almuric? He's just leading you from disaster to catastrophe!

CONAN

(Stoic; he doesn't stop packing)  
I pledged my sword to him. What kind of man would I be if I abandoned him when events turned against him? Almuric's choices are limited: make a stand against the Kothians and be wiped out, or keep fleeing and maybe get lucky.

(He notices what she has been doing.)  
Leave those dresses; we don't need them.  
(brusque)

NATALA

(frustrated and resentful)  
But I like these dresses! And you said I looked good in them.

CONAN

(imperturbable)  
I like your skin more than I like dresses, and I'm trying to keep it in one piece. The only way we can survive is to move fast. So toss those dresses; we need to get moving!

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXTERIOR: THE SHEM/STYGIA BORDER -- DAY.

Conan is on horseback with Natala in front of him on the saddle; they are galloping madly southward into desert country. Their horse is laden with several sets of saddlebags. All around them are Almuric's horsemen, also galloping madly. Behind them, on low grassy hills that line the southern side of the Styx, Kothian heavy cavalry slows down and draws up to watch from safety as Almuric's army flees into Stygia.

FADE TO:

EXTERIOR: STYGIA -- THE STYGIAN DESERT -- DAY.

Conan is on horseback with Natala in front of him on the saddle; they are galloping madly southward into desert country. Their horse is laden with several sets of saddlebags. All around them are Almuric's horsemen, also galloping madly. Their number is down to about a hundred, and everybody looks much dustier. Some of them, like Conan, are sharing their saddles with women. A formation of Stygian chariots, looking like Egyptian chariots, is in hot pursuit, showering them with flights of arrows and javelins.

FADE TO:

EXTERIOR: STYGIA -- A DUSTY STYGIAN VILLAGE -- DAY.

A dusty Conan, wearing rent and battered armor, standing on foot with a dusty Natala on foot beside him, is haggling with a Stygian villager. Beside him is his horse, dusty, exhausted, its head hanging. A few dozen of Almuric's horsemen, also dusty, exhausted, and battered, are waiting a short distance away. Some of them also have women with them. Behind the Stygian villager is a corral with several camels in it. Finally agreement is reached. Conan hands the Stygian some coins, the Stygian pockets them, and leads a camel out of the corral and hands the reins to Conan. The Stygian takes the horse's reins.

FADE TO:

EXTERIOR: STYGIA -- THE STYGIAN DESERT -- DAY.

Conan, on foot, is plodding through the desert, leading the camel, atop which rides Natala. A dozen or so of his fellow soldiers are walking along with him, all on foot, a few leading horses. One of the soldiers shouts and points to the rear, where four squads of Stygian chariots are coming up fast. All the soldiers, including Conan, who have mounts, mount up immediately and gallop away, leaving the dismounted soldiers to fight a hopeless rearguard action. Almuric, even though he is mounted, is finally tired of running, and stays with the foot soldiers to direct a defense. He goes down, peppered with arrows.

FADE TO:

EXTERIOR: THE STYGIA/KUSH BORDER - DESERT - DAY.

Beneath a burning sun, Conan is leading the camel across undulating sand dunes; Natala is swaying tiredly atop the camel. Even the camel looks exhausted.

NATALA

(weak and exhausted)  
Where are we, Conan? Are we still in Stygia?

CONAN

I don't know. We may be in Kush; the border isn't marked here.

(He stops and halts the camel,  
listens, and sniffs the air.)

(cont'd.)

Wait here.

He approaches the next sand ridge, dropping to his knees and elbows before he reaches the crest. Slowly and carefully he leopard-crawls to the crest and barely pokes the upper part of his head above the crest.

The POV pans and zooms to show, in a depression on the other side of the ridge, a Stygian officer, accompanied by a a squad of Stygian soldiers, talking to a squad of Kushite spearmen, who look like well-equipped Zulu warriors. All seem to be on friendly terms and completely in agreement.

CUT TO:

CONAN, STILL BEHIND THE RIDGECREST.

He slides back down and returns to Natala and the camel.

CONAN

Bad luck. We're in Kush all right, but the Stygians have recruited the Kushites as allies. It looks like they're going to hunt us together. We need to find a place to hide, and travel by night.

Natala's head droops; she seems to collapse in on herself.

NATALA

Oh, Conan, will this never end?

CONAN

(Stares grimly at the ridge that hides them  
from the Stygians and Kushites.)

It will end.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN.

EXTERIOR: KUSH -- SOUTHERN DESERT -- EVENING -- A SANDSTORM.

The camel is hunkered down in the lee of a dune; Conan and Natala are huddled between the camel and the dune. Clouds of sand are blasting past them.

NATALA

What will become of us, Conan?

CONAN

Actually, this is good luck for us. The sandstorm will obliterate our tracks, and hide us from the Kushites and Stygians.

Natala groans and hides her head in her arms.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN.

EXTERIOR: KUSH -- SOUTHERN DESERT -- MORNING.

Conan and Natala dig themselves out of a hill of sand. Conan's armor is practically falling off him. Natala's outer clothing is reduced to rags. Where the camel was is another hill of sand. Dismayed, they dig out the camel and find its dead carcass.

NATALA

(despairing)

Oh, Conan, now what will we do?

CONAN

(stoic)

Butcher the camel and have a feast.

NATALA

(she can't believe what she just heard.)

A feast?!?

CONAN

We won't be able to carry the meat with us; we'll be weighed down just carrying the waterbags. So we'll eat as much as we can, then press on.

He draws his knife and bends to the camel.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

EXTERIOR: SOUTHERN KUSH -- TRACKLESS DESERT -- DAY.

Conan stands amid aching desolation, staring at the shimmering desert. He has abandoned his armor and padded underclothing, retaining only a silk loin-cloth, girdled by a wide gold-buckled belt from which hang his saber and his broad-bladed poniard. Natala rests at his feet, one arm grasping his knee, against which her head droops. She is wearing only a short sleeveless silken tunic, girdled at the waist. She is sunburned; Conan's bronzed limbs show scarcely healed wounds.

Conan blinks in the blinding sunlight. He lifts a small canteen

from his belt and shakes it. There is only a faint splashing; he scowls at it.

NATALA

Oh, Conan, we shall die here! I am so thirsty!

Conan growls, and glares at the surrounding waste as if the desert were his enemy. He stoops and puts the canteen to Natala's lips.

CONAN

(with gentle confidence)

Drink till I tell you to stop, Natala.

She drinks with little panting gasps, and doesn't stop until the canteen is empty. Then, suddenly realizing that he had deliberately allowed her to drink their entire remaining water supply, she looks up at Conan, tears springing from her eyes.

NATALA

(wringing her hands)

Oh, Conan, why did you let me drink it all?  
I did not know - now there is none for you!

CONAN

(growls)

Hush. Don't waste your strength in weeping.

He straightens, and tosses the canteen away.

NATALA

(whispering, staring after the canteen)

Why did you do that?

Conan is standing motionless, slightly behind her. He stares into the distance, then at the back of her head as pity and grim resolution chase each other across his face; his fingers close slowly about the hilt of his saber.

He slowly and silently slides the saber from its sheath, and again lifts his gaze to the horizon. Then he squints and stiffens as he looks into the distance.

CUT TO:

VIEW OF THE SHIMMERING DESERT HORIZON.

There is an angular irregularity glimmering on the horizon.

CUT TO:

Conan's face, as he raises his free hand to shade his eyes.

CUT TO:

VIEW OF THE HORIZON:

Spires and minarets and gleaming walls are visible through the heat shimmer.

CUT TO:

CONAN AND NATALA (cont'd.)

Natala sees it too. She stops sobbing and struggles to her knees and follows his gaze.

NATALA

Is it a city, Conan? Or is it but a shadow?

Conan blinks, squinches his eyes shut and opens them again, looks away and back again.

CUT TO:

VIEW OF THE HORIZON:

Spires and minarets and gleaming walls are visible through the heat shimmer.

CUT TO:

CONAN AND NATALA (cont'd.)

CONAN

The devil knows. It's worth a try, though.

He thrusts his saber back in its sheath, stoops and lifts Natala in his arms. She resists weakly.

NATALA

Don't waste your strength carrying me,  
Conan. I can walk.

CONAN

The ground gets rockier here. You would soon wear your sandals to shreds. Besides, if we are to reach the city at all, we must do it quickly, and I can make better time this way.

With fresh energy he begins striding out across the sandy waste.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN.

EXTERIOR: THE DESERT JUST OUTSIDE THE XUTHAL CITY GATE -- EVENING.

Conan halts in the shade of the city walls. He sets Natala on her feet and stretches his back and arms as he inspects the walls and gate.

The POV pans across the massive gate and walls. They tower 30 feet in height, composed of glass-smooth greenish stone. The parapets at the top of the wall are silent and empty.

Conan shouts, waits for a response that does not come, then bangs on the gate with his saber-hilt. But the silence is broken only by hollow echoes.

Natala cringes close to Conan, frightened. Conan tries the gate, and steps back, drawing his saber, as it swings silently inward.

NATALA  
(presses a fist to her mouth, as she  
sees what lies within)  
Oh, look, Conan!

CUT TO:

VIEW THROUGH THE XUTHAL GATE.

Just inside the gate lies a human body, that of a tall and powerful man, apparently Khitaiian, clad in high-strapped sandals and a purple silk tunic, wearing a short sword in a cloth-of-gold scabbard.

Beyond the gate is a wide open courtyard. Bordered by the arched doorways of houses composed of the same greenish stone as the outer walls. The edifices are lofty and imposing, pinnacled with shining domes and minarets. In the center of the courtyard is a square well.

Conan takes Natala's wrist, draws her through the gate, and closes it behind them.

CUT TO:

EXTERIOR: XUTHAL -- WITHIN THE CITY WALLS, JUST INSIDE THE GATE --  
EVENING.

NATALA  
(shrinking back as she indicates the  
body)  
Is he dead?

Conan feels the flesh of the body.

CONAN  
Not a wound on him, but he's dead as Almuric  
with forty Stygian arrows in him. In Crom's  
name, let's see to the well! If there's  
water in it, we'll drink, dead men or no.

They walk to the well and look into it. POV pans to show the

surface of the water, tantalizingly glinting fifty feet below the curb. There is nothing to draw it up with.

CUT TO:

CLOSE-UP OF THEIR FACES.

Natala is sick with disappointment; Conan is furious. He curses blackly, and turns to look around for some means to draw it up.

Natala looks in a different direction, and screams.

CUT TO:

WIDER VIEW.

The formerly 'dead' man is on his feet and rushing them, his eyes blazing and his shortsword gleaming in his hand. Conan whirls at Natala's scream, curses, and quick-draws his saber, decapitating the attacker with a slashing cut. The head goes flying; the body staggers a few steps, jetting blood from the neck, then falls.

CONAN

(glaring down at the corpse)

Crom's bones! This fellow is no deader now than he was a few minutes ago. Into what madhouse have we strayed?

Natala has been hiding her eyes with her hands; now she peeks between her fingers.

NATALA

(quivering)

Oh, Conan, will the people of this city not kill us, because of this?

CONAN

Well, this creature would have killed us if I hadn't lopped off his head.

He looks around at the empty archways and the silent green walls. No sound or movement.

CONAN

(cont'd.)

I don't think any one saw us. I'll hide the evidence.

He lifts the carcass by its swordbelt with one hand, and the head by its long hair with the other, then half carries, half drags the remains to the well.

CONAN

(growling vindictively)  
Since we can't drink the water, I'll see  
that nobody else enjoys drinking it. Curse  
such a well, anyway!

He heaves the body over the curb, followed by the head.

SOUND FX:  
Dull splash.

NATALA  
(whispering)  
There's blood on the stones.

CONAN  
(growling)  
There'll be more unless I find water soon.  
(beat)  
We'll go into one of these doors. Surely  
we'll find people after a while.

She snuggles close to him.

NATALA  
Oh, Conan! I'm afraid! This is a city of  
ghosts and dead men! Let us go back into  
the desert! Better to die there, then to  
face these terrors!

CONAN  
(snarling)  
We'll go into the desert when they throw us  
off the walls. There's water somewhere in  
this city, and I'll find it, if I have to  
kill every man in it.

NATALA  
(whispering in dread)  
But what if they come to life again?

CONAN  
Then I'll keep killing them until they stay  
dead! Come on! That doorway is as good as  
another! Stay behind me, and don't run  
unless I tell you to.

As dusk falls, filling the city with purple shadows, they enter an  
open doorway.

CUT TO:

INTERIOR: XUTHAL -- ROOM #1 -- EVENING.

It is a wide chamber. The walls are hung with velvet tapestries worked in curious designs. Floor, walls, and ceiling are of the green, glassy stone; the walls are decorated with gold frieze-work. Furs and satin cushions litter the floor. Several doorways let into other rooms. They pass through one of the doors.

CUT TO:

INTERIOR: XUTHAL -- ROOMS #2, 3, 4, etc -- EVENING.

They traverse several similar rooms. Conan sniffs, follows his nose to a couch, presses his hand to it and grunts suspiciously.

CONAN

Some one was here not long ago. This couch is still warm from contact with a human body. That cushion bears the imprint of some one's hips. Then there's a faint scent of perfume lingering in the air.

They continue to traverse rooms, avoiding those that are unlighted. The lighted rooms are bathed in a soft weird light emanating from jewels set in the walls in fantastic designs.

As they pass into one of the illuminated rooms, Natala suddenly cries out and catches Conan's arm.

CONAN

Crom!

He wheels, glaring about for an enemy, but no one is there.

CONAN

(snarls)

What's the matter? If you ever grab my sword-arm again, I'll skin you. Do you want me to get my throat cut? What were you yelling about?

NATALA

Look there.  
(she points)

The POV pans to show a table of polished ebony on which stand golden vessels, containing food and drink. The room is unoccupied.

CONAN

(grunts)

Well, whoever this feast is prepared for,

he'll have to look elsewhere tonight.

NATALA

Dare we eat it, Conan? The people might come upon us, and...

CONAN

*Lir an Mannanan mac Lir!*

He grabs her by the nape of her neck and thrusts her into a gilded chair at the end of the table.

CONAN

(cont'd.)

We starve and you make objections! Eat!

Conan takes a chair at the other end, seizes a jade goblet containing a crimson wine-like liquor, and empties it at a gulp. He then attacks the food, exotic fruits and unknown meats, with gusto. Ignoring the exquisite vessels and golden knives and forks, he grasps the meat-joints in his fingers and tears them wolfishly with his teeth. Natala eats more daintily, but just as ravenously.

CONAN

(through a mouthful of food)

I suppose it might be poisoned...

Natala freezes in mid-chew, staring at Conan with wide eyes.

CONAN

(continues chewing)

... but I don't care. I'd rather die of poisoning than starvation.

Natala watches unmoving for a moment as Conan continues consuming the food, then she resumes eating.

Finally Conan is satisfied. He leans back with a deep sigh of relief, relaxes in his chair, and gazes longingly at one of the couches. Natala has also finished, but she is not relaxed. She glances timidly at the mysterious doorways, some of which are lighted, but some of which are dark. She rises quickly, goes around the table, and seats herself on Conan's knee. She glances nervously at those doorways that are unlighted.

NATALA

We have eaten, drunk, and rested. Let us leave this place, Conan. It's evil. I can feel it.

CONAN

Well, we haven't been harmed so far...

He is interrupted by a soft but sinister rustling sound. He springs to his feet, dumping Natala and drawing his saber as he whirls to face the doorway from which the sound had seemed to come.

He slinks noiselessly toward the doorway. Natala follows, pressing a fist to her mouth. Conan's outthrust head is sunk between his shoulders as he glides forward in a half crouch, as soundless as a stalking tiger. He halts at the doorway, Natala peering fearfully from behind him. The darkened room beyond the doorway is partially illuminated by the radiance behind them, which streams across it into yet another chamber.

In that chamber a man lays unmoving on a raised dais. He looks similar to the man Conan had killed before the outer gate. His garments are in a similar style, but richer, and ornamented with jewels. The instant of suspense stretches, and then the sound is heard again, like the rustling of cloth. Conan draws back, drawing the clinging Natala with him. He claps a hand over her mouth just in time to check her shriek.

Now they can no longer see the dais, but they can see the shadow it casts on the wall behind it. Now another shadow moves across the wall, like a huge shapeless black blot. No sound is heard but Natala's quick panting gasps. The great shadow engulfs that of the dais, and remains for a long instant. Then it recedes, leaving the shadow of the dais, empty of the sleeper.

Natala starts to gurgle hysterically, but Conan gives her a quick shake to quiet her. They wait for a moment, then Conan moves out into the unlighted chamber again, ready for anything. He looks into the room beyond; the POV pans to show that the dais is empty of its former occupant. On its silken covering shines a single drop of blood. Natala sees the blood and groans with fear. They stare at the empty dais.

CONAN

(quietly)

Now I'm ready to leave.

He takes Natala's hand, and turns back.

A soft human footstep is heard, somewhere back among the chambers they have already traversed.

Conan hesitates, then turns aside, intending to reach the outer

court via a different route. But they are still crossing the first chamber of their new route when a silken curtain rustles, and a man appears before a curtained alcove. He is similar to the others they have encountered, tall, well-made, and clad in purple garments with a jeweled girdle and a short sword. He exhibits neither surprise nor hostility; his eyes are as dreamy as a lotus eater's.

After a moment he speaks in Chinese, in a far-away detached tone (No translation or subtitles). Conan replies in Stygian (sounds like Egyptian). The stranger answers in the same tongue, and they converse in Stygian.

THIRD MAN

Who are you?

CONAN

I am Conan, a Cimmerian. This is Natala, of Brythunia. What city is this?

The stranger ignores Conan, but gazes dreamily on Natala.

THIRD MAN

(to Natala)

Of all my rich visions, this is the strangest! Oh girl of the golden locks, from what far dreamland do you come? From Andarra, or Tothra, or Kuth of the star-girdle?

CONAN

(harshly)

What madness is this?

THIRD MAN

(continuing to ignore Conan)

I have dreamed more gorgeous beauties, lithe women with hair dusky as night, and dark eyes of unfathomed mystery. But your skin is white as milk, your eyes are clear as dawn, and there is about you a freshness and daintiness alluring as honey. Come to my couch, little dream girl!

He advances and reaches for her, but Conan strikes his hand aside with bone-breaking force. The stranger reels back, clutching his numbed arm, his eyes clouding.

THIRD MAN

What rebellion of ghosts is this?

Barbarian, I command ye - begone! Fade!  
Dissipate! *Fade! Vanish!*

CONAN  
(infuriated)  
I'll vanish your head from your shoulders!  
(brandishes his saber)  
Is this the welcome you give strangers? By  
Crom, I'll drench these hangings in blood!

The dreaminess fades from the stranger's eyes, to be replaced by a look of bewilderment.

THIRD MAN  
Thog! You are real! Whence come you? Who  
you? What do you in Xuthal?

CONAN  
(growls)  
We came in from the desert. We wandered  
into the city at dusk, famishing. We  
found a feast set for some one, and we ate  
it. I have no money to pay for it. In my  
country, no starving man is denied food, but  
you civilized people must have your  
recompense - if you are like all I ever met.  
We have done no harm and we were just  
leaving. By Crom, I do not like this place,  
where dead men rise, and sleeping men vanish  
into the bellies of shadows!

THIRD MAN  
(starting violently, turning pale)  
What did you say? Shadows? Into the  
bellies of shadows?

CONAN  
(cautiously)  
Well... whatever it is that takes a man from  
a sleeping-dais and leaves only a spot of  
blood.

THIRD MAN  
(trembling, voice cracked and shrill)  
You have seen? You have *seen*?

CONAN  
Only a man sleeping on a dais, and a shadow  
that engulfed him.

With an awful scream the stranger turns and rushes from the chamber. He caroms blindly from the side of the door, rights himself, and flees through the adjoining chambers, still screaming at the top of his voice. Conan stares in amazement after him; Natala trembles as she clutches his arm. Even after they can no longer see him, they can still hear his frightful screams, dwindling in the distance, and echoing from the vaulted roofs. Suddenly one scream, louder than the others, rises and breaks short, followed by blank silence.

CONAN

Crom!

He wipes perspiration from his forehead with an unsteady hand.

CONAN

(cont'd.)

Surely this is a city of the mad! Let's get out of here, before we meet other madmen.

NATALA

(whimpering)

It is all a nightmare! We are dead and damned! We died out on the desert and are in hell! We are disembodied spirits - ow!  
(as Conan gives her a spank with his open hand.)

CONAN

You're no spirit when a pat makes you yell like that. We are alive, though we may not be if we loiter in this devil-haunted pile. Come!

He takes her hand and starts to lead her back along their previous path, retracing their path. After traversing a single chamber, Conan suddenly stops short, listening attentively. They face a doorway from which footsteps are heard. A shadowy figure appears in the doorway - a woman's figure.

CUT TO THALIS.

She is tall, lithe, shapely; clad in a narrow girdle crusted with jewels. A burnished mass of jet-black hair sets off her ivory skin. Her dark eyes, shaded by long dusky lashes, are deep with sensuous mystery.

CUT TO:

Conan and Natala staring in awe at the gorgeous stranger. Conan surveys her with frank appreciation. Natala looks 'threatened'.

CUT TO:

THALIS

[She speaks in Stygian, an Egyptian-sounding language. All three of them will converse in Stygian, Conan fluently, Natala clumsily and with an accent.]

Who are you? What do you in Xuthal? Who is that girl?

CONAN

(impatient)

Who are you?

THALIS

I am Thalís the Stygian. Are you mad, to come here?

CONAN

I've been thinking I must be. By Crom, if I am sane, I'm out of place here, because these people are all maniacs. We stagger in from the desert, dying of thirst and hunger, and we come upon a dead man who tries to stab me in the back. We enter a palace, rich and luxuriant, yet apparently empty. We find a meal set, but with no feasters. Then we see a shadow devour a sleeping man.

CUT TO THALIS.

A flicker of fear momentarily crosses her face.

CUT TO CONAN.

He is watching her closely.

CONAN

(cont'd.)

Well?

CUT TO:

Full shot.

THALIS

(regaining control of herself)

Well what?

CONAN

I was just waiting for you to run through the rooms howling like a wild woman. The

man I told about the shadow did.

THALIS

(shrugs)

That was the screams I heard, then. Well, to every man his fate, and it's foolish to squeal like a rat in a trap. When Thog wants me, he will come for me.

CONAN

Who is Thog?

THALIS

(stares appraisingly at Conan)

Sit down on that divan and I will tell you. But first tell me your names.

CONAN

I am Conan, a Cimmerian, and this is Natala, a daughter of Brythunia. We are refugees of an army destroyed on the borders of Kush. But I am not desirous of sitting down, where black shadows might steal up on my back.

Thalis laughs musically and seats herself, stretching out her supple limbs with studied abandon.

THALIS

Be at ease. If Thog wishes you, he will take you, wherever you are. That man you mentioned, who screamed and ran - did you not hear him give one great cry, and then fall silent? In his frenzy, he must have run full into that which he sought to escape. No man may avoid his fate.

(feasting her eyes on Conan's physique)

CONAN

Hmmp.

He sits down on the edge of a couch, his saber across his knees. His eyes wander suspiciously about the chamber.

Natala nestles against him, watching him jealously, her legs tucked up under her. She eyes Thalis with suspicion and resentment.

CONAN

What is this place, and who are these people?

THALIS

This city is called Xuthal; it is very ancient. It is built over an oasis, which the founders of Xuthal found in their wanderings. They came from the east, so long ago that not even their descendants remember the age.

CONAN

Surely there are not many of them; these palaces seem empty.

THALIS

No; and yet more than you might think. The city is really one great palace, with every building inside the walls closely connected with the others. You might walk among these chambers for hours and see no one. At other times, you would meet hundreds of the inhabitants.

CONAN

(uneasy)

How is that?

THALIS

Much of the time these people lie in sleep. Their dream life is as important - and to them as real - as their waking life. You have heard of the black lotus? In certain pits of the city it grows. Through the ages they have cultivated it, until, instead of death, its juice induces dreams, gorgeous and fantastic. In these dreams they spend most of their time. Their lives are vague, erratic, and without plan. They dream, they wake, drink, love, eat, and dream again. They seldom finish anything they begin, but leave it half completed and sink back again into the slumber of the black lotus. That meal you found - doubtless one awoke, felt the urge of hunger, prepared the meal for himself, then forgot about it and wandered away to dream again.

CONAN

Where do they get their food? I saw no fields or vineyards outside the city. Have

they orchards and cattle-pens within the walls?

THALIS

(shakes her head)

They manufacture their own food out of the primal elements. They are wonderful scientists, when they are not drugged with their dream-flower. Their ancestors were mental giants, who built this marvelous city in the desert, and though the race became slaves to their curious passions, some of their wonderful knowledge still remains. Have you wondered about these lights?

(she gestures at the jewels glowing in the walls)

They are jewels, fused with radium. You rub them with your thumb to make them glow, and rub them again, the opposite way, to extinguish them. That is but a single example of their science. But much they have forgotten. They take little interest in waking life, choosing to lie most of the time in death-like sleep.

CONAN

Then the dead man at the gate -

THALIS

Was doubtless slumbering. Sleepers of the lotus are like the dead. It is impossible to detect the slightest sign of life. The spirit has left the body and is roaming at will through other exotic worlds. The man at the gate was a good example of the irresponsibility of these people's lives. He was guarding the gate, where custom decrees a watch be kept, though no enemy has ever advanced across the desert. In other parts of the city you would find other guards, generally sleeping as soundly as the man at the gate.

CONAN

(mulls this over for a while)

Where are the people now?

THALIS

Scattered in various parts of the city;

lying on couches, on silken divans, in cushion-littered alcoves, on fur-covered daises; all wrapped in the shining veil of dreams.

CONAN

(looking around uneasily)

It is not soothing to think of hundreds of people lying cold and still throughout these palaces.

(pause)

What of the thing that stole through the chambers and carried away the man on the dais?

THALIS

(shudders)

That was Thog, the Ancient, the god of Xuthal. Whether he came here with the ancient founders, or was here when they built the city, none knows. But the people of Xuthal worship him. Mostly he sleeps below the city but sometimes at irregular intervals he grows hungry, and then he steals through the secret corridors and the dim-lit chambers, seeking prey. Then none is safe.

Natala moans with terror and clasps Conan's neck as if to resist an attempt to drag her from her protector's side.

CONAN

(aghast)

Crom! You mean to tell me these people lie down calmly and sleep, with this demon crawling among them?

THALIS

It is only occasionally that he is hungry. A god must have his sacrifices. When I was a child in Stygia the people lived under the shadow of the priests. None ever knew when he or she would be seized and dragged to the altar. What difference whether the priests give a victim to the gods, or the god comes for his own victim?

CONAN

Such is not the custom of my people, nor of

Natala's either. The Hyborians do not sacrifice humans to their god, Mitra, and as for my people - by Crom, I'd like to see a priest try to drag a Cimmerian to the altar! There'd be blood spilt, but not as the priest intended!

THALIS

(laughing, but gazing at Conan appreciatively)

You are a barbarian. Thog is very ancient and very terrible.

CONAN

These folk must be either fools or heroes, to lie down and dream their idiotic dreams, knowing they might awaken in his belly.

THALIS

(laughing)

They know nothing else. For untold centuries Thog has preyed on them. He has been one of the factors which have reduced their numbers from thousands to hundreds. A few more generations and they will be extinct, and Thog must either fare forth into the world for new prey, or retire to the underworld whence he came so long ago.

They realize their ultimate doom, but they are fatalists, incapable of resistance or escape. Not one of the present generation has been out of sight of these walls. There is an oasis a day's march to the south - I have seen it on the old maps their ancestors drew on parchment - but no man of Xuthal has visited it for three generations, much less made an attempt to explore the fertile grasslands which the maps show lying another day's march beyond it.

CUT TO:

Conan suddenly focusing on the mention of an oasis and fertile grasslands.

CUT TO:

THALIS

(cont'd)

They are a fast-fading race, drowned in

lotus-dreams, stimulating their waking hours by means of the golden wine which heals wounds and prolongs life, and invigorates the most sated debauchee.

Yet they cling to life, and fear the deity they worship. You saw how one went mad at the knowledge that Thog was roving the palaces. I have seen the whole city screaming and tearing its hair, and running frenziedly out of the gates, to cower outside the walls and draw lots to see which would be bound and flung back through the arched doorways to satisfy Thog's lust and hunger. Were they not all slumbering now, the word of his coming would send them raving and shrieking again through the outer gates.

NATALA  
(hysterical)  
Oh, Conan! Let us flee!

CUT TO:

CONAN  
In good time.

His eyes are burning on Thalís' ivory limbs.

CONAN  
(cont'd)  
What are you, a Stygian woman, doing here?

CUT TO:

Thalís, as she leans lithely back against the velvet divan, and intertwines her fingers behind her head.

THALIS  
I came here as a young girl. I am the daughter of a king, no common woman, as you can see by my skin, which is as white as that of your little blond there.

FADE TO:

EXTERIOR: STYGIA - LUXUR - A PALACE - A WALLED GARDEN - DAY.  
A younger Thalís is admiring her reflection in a placid pool in the garden, surrounded by servants and maids-in-waiting.

THALIS (V.O.)  
(continuing as Voiceover)

I was abducted by a rebel prince,

FADE TO:

A Stygian Prince, handsome, magnetic, and muscular, clad in ornate Egyptian armor and followed by a few Stygian warriors, bursts into the garden and seizes Thalís while his henchmen overpower her servants. She struggles to no avail as the laughing St. Pr. and his henchmen flee the garden.

THALIS (V.O.)

(cont'd.)

who, with an army of Kushite bowmen, pushed southward into the wilderness,

FADE TO:

EXTERIOR: STYGIA - SEMI-DESERT - DAY.

The Stygian Prince and Thalís are sharing a chariot; Thalís now seems quite happy with the Prince. They are followed by a few chariots containing the Prince's henchmen, and a column of Nubian archers in Stygian armor and gear.

THALIS (V.O.)

(cont'd.)

searching for a land he could make his own.

FADE TO:

EXTERIOR: KUSH - BARREN, ARID DESERT - DAY.

Thalís and the Prince are walking; dusty, bedraggled, and gaunt. They are followed by a few Kushite archers also in bad shape.

THALIS (V.O.)

(cont'd.)

He and all his warriors perished in the desert,

FADE TO:

Thalís, her garb reduced to rags, is now riding on a camel; a Kushite archer is plodding beside the camel, leading it.

THALIS (V.O.)

(cont'd.)

but one, before he died, placed me on a camel and walked beside it until he dropped and died in his tracks.

FADE TO:

The camel is plodding irregularly, with Thalís drooping semiconscious atop it; the Kushite archer, face down in the sand, is disappearing behind her.

THALIS (V.O.)

(cont'd.)

The beast wandered on, and I finally passed into delirium from thirst and hunger, and

awakened in this city.

FADE TO:

INTERIOR: XUTHAL - A CHAMBER - DAY.

Thalis, dusty, gaunt, and bedraggled, is reclining on a divan, surrounded by Xuthalis, one of whom is supporting her head and shoulders.

THALIS (V.O.)

(cont'd.)

They told me I had been seen from the walls, early in the dawn, lying senseless beside a dead camel. They went forth and brought me in and revived me with their wonderful golden wine.

One of the Xuthalis holds a flask of Golden Wine to her lips. She drinks eagerly, returning to full health and beauty before our eyes.

THALIS (V.O.)

(cont'd.)

And only the sight of a woman would have led them to have ventured so far from their walls.

FADE TO:

Thalis is now sitting alertly on a divan, and clad in new and exotic garb, surrounded by Xuthali men who are paying very close attention to her, as, with a pleasant expression on her face, she talks and gestures, teaching them Stygian.

THALIS (V.O.)

(cont'd.)

They were naturally much interested in me, especially the men. As I could not speak their language, they learned to speak mine. They were very quick and able of intellect; they learned my language long before I learned theirs. But they were more interested in me than in my language. I have been, and am, the only thing for which a man of them will forgo his lotus-dreams for a space.

FADE TO:

INTERIOR: XUTHAL - THE CURRENT CHAMBER - THE PRESENT DAY.

Thalis laughs wickedly, flashes her eyes meaningly at Conan.

THALIS

(cont'd.)

Of course the women are all jealous of me. They are handsome enough in their yellow-

skinned way, but they are dreamy and uncertain as the men, and these latter like me not only for my beauty, but for my reality. I am no dream! Though I have dreamed the dreams of the lotus, I am a normal woman, with earthly emotions and desires. With such these moon-eyed yellow women can not compete.

That is why it would be better for you to cut that girl's throat with your saber, before the men of Xuthal waken and catch her.

CUT TO:  
Natala, as she reacts to this.

CUT TO:  
Back to Thalís.

THALIS

(cont'd.)

They will put her through paces she never dreamed of! She is too soft to endure what I have thrived on. I am a daughter of Luxur, and before I had known fifteen summers I had been led through the temples of Derketo, the dusky goddess, and had been initiated into the mysteries. Not that my first years in Xuthal were years of unmodified pleasure! The people of Xuthal have forgotten more than the priestesses of Derketo ever dreamed. They live only for sensual joys. Dreaming or waking, their lives are filled with exotic ecstasies, beyond the ken of ordinary men.

CONAN

(growling in disgust)

Damned degenerates!

THALIS

(smiling lazily)

It is all in the point of view.

CONAN

(suddenly business-like)

Well, we're wasting time. I can see this is no place for ordinary mortals. We'll be

gone before your morons awake, or Thog comes to devour us. I think the desert would be kinder.

Natala is in emphatic agreement with Conan's words. He stands up, drawing her up beside him.

CONAN

(cont'd.)

If you'll show us the nearest way out of this city, we'll take ourselves off.

But he is still gazing admiringly at Thalís' figure. She doesn't miss his look, and smiles enigmatically as she rises with the lithe ease of a great lazy cat.

THALIS

Follow me.

She leads the way, treating Conan to a rear view of her supple figure and poised carriage. She departs by a different way than they had come by, then halts in a wide ivory-chased chamber, and points to a tiny fountain gurgling in the center of the ivory floor.

THALIS

(faintly mocking)

Don't you want to wash your face, child? It is stained with dust, and there is dust in your hair.

Natala flushes at the implied malice behind Thalís' suggestion, but she goes to the fountain and kneels, shakes back her hair, slips her tunic down to her waist, and begins to lave her face, arms, and shoulders.

CONAN

By Crom! A woman will stop to consider her beauty, if the devil himself were on her heels. Haste, girl, you'll be dusty again before we've got out of sight of the city. And Thalís, I'd take it kindly if you'd furnish us with a bit of food and drink.

Thalís leans against him, slipping an arm about his shoulders. Her naked flank presses against his thigh.

THALIS

(whispering urgently)

Why dare the desert? Stay here! I will

teach you the ways of Xuthal. I will protect you, I will love you! You are a real man: I am sick of these moon-calves who sigh and dream and wake, and dream again. I am hungry for the hard, clean passion of a man from the earth. The blue of your dynamic eyes makes my heart pound in my bosom; and the touch of your iron-thewed arm maddens me.

She throws both arms about his neck and and stands on tiptoe, her vibrant body shivering against his.

THALIS

(cont'd.)

Stay here! I will make you king of Xuthal! I will show you all the ancient mysteries, and the exotic ways of pleasure! I-

CUT TO:

Conan, looking over Thalís' shoulder.

PAN TO:

Natala, throwing back her damp, tousled hair, stopping short, her eyes dilating, her lips parting in a shocked O.

Conan disengages Thalís' clinging arms with an embarrassed grunt, and puts her aside with one arm.

Thalís smiles enigmatically, seeming to nod her head in mysterious cogitation.

Natala rises and jerks up her tunic, her eyes blazing, her lips pouting sulkily.

CONAN

(in exasperation, but under his breath)

Crom!

Thalís doesn't press. She beckons them with her hand to follow, turning and walking across the chamber. There, close to the tapestried wall, she suddenly halts, as if something had caught her attention.

CONAN

What do you hear?

Thalís points at an arched doorway.

THALIS  
Watch that doorway.

Conan wheels, quick-drawing his sword. The doorway remains empty.

CUT TO:

View from behind Conan. From this different angle, we see Natala by the fountain, Thalís standing near her, and Conan's back as he faces the doorway.

With incredible quickness, Thalís claps her hand over Natala's mouth, while the same time passing her other arm about Natala's waist, and jerks her back against the wall, which gives way as Thalís' shoulder presses against it. A section of wall swings inward, and through a slit in the tapestry she slides with her captive as

CUT TO:

Conan, as a quick faint scuffling noise, and a half-choked gasp, prompt him to whirl, to gape at an empty room in which the tapestry is just settling back in place. From behind the tapestried wall comes Natala's muffled scream.

CUT TO:

INTERIOR: XUTHAL - AN UNLIT CORRIDOR.

We briefly see the two women, Natala pinioned in Thalís' arms. As the secret door swings to again, the last light disappears, leaving the tunnel so dimly lit we can barely see the women. Perhaps we are seeing them as if with infra-red vision. It is evident that they are unable to see anything.

Thalís takes her hand from Natala's mouth to grope for a bolt on the door and slide it home, and Natala begins to scream. Thalís laughs evilly.

                  THALIS  
Scream if you will, little fool. It will  
only shorten your life.

Natala stops screaming and cowers, shaking.

                  NATALA  
Why did you do this? What are you going to  
do?

                  THALIS  
I am going to take you down this corridor for  
a short distance, and leave you for one who  
will sooner or later come for you.

CUT TO:

INTERIOR: XUTHAL - THE CURRENT CHAMBER - CONTINUOUS.

Conan gapes at the empty room in which the tapestry is just settling back in place. From behind the tapestried wall comes Natala's muffled scream. He hurls himself against the wall with a maddened roar.

(SFX: a crunching impact that would have destroyed a weaker wall or a weaker man.)

After bouncing off the wall, he rips away the tapestry, revealing an apparently blank wall. Enraged, he lifts his saber as though to hew through the marble, then stops when he hears a sudden sound behind him. He whirls, eyes blazing.

PAN TO:

Twenty yellow-skinned men in purple tunics, with short swords in their hands. They surge in on him with hostile cries. Conan, already maddened, snarls with bloodthirsty gratification.

CUT TO:

INTERIOR: XUTHAL - THE UNLIT CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS.

THALIS AND NATALA.

NATALA

Ohhhhhh!

(voice breaks in a sob of terror)

Why should you harm me? I have never injured you!

THALIS

I want your warrior. You stand in my way. He desires me - I could read the look in his eyes. But for you, he would be willing to stay here and be my king. When you are out of the way, he will follow me.

NATALA

(vehement certainty)

He will cut your throat!

THALIS

We shall see.

(confident in her power over men)

At any rate, you will not know whether he stabs me or kisses me, because you will be the bride of him who dwells in darkness. Come!

CUT TO:

INTERIOR: XUTHAL - THE CURRENT CHAMBER - CONTINUOUS.

CONAN AND THE XUTHALI WARRIORS.

Conan leaps, and overreaching the short sword of the first attacker, splits his skull. Wheeling like a cat, he catches a descending wrist on his edge, and the hand gripping the short sword goes flying through the air scattering a shower of blood. Without pausing, he twists and shifts, avoiding the blundering rush of two of the Xuthali swordsmen, and the blade of one, missing Conan, impales the breast of the other.

The Xuthalis yell in dismay at this, and Conan voices a short bark of laughter as he bounds aside from a whistling cut, and slashes under the guard of another Xuthali, releasing a long spurt of blood from the belly of the latter as he collapses screaming.

The Xuthalis howl like mad wolves. Unaccustomed to battle, they are ridiculously slow and clumsy compared to Conan's tigerish quickness as he springs, side-steps, whirls, and twists, his blade singing about their ears. They are hindered by their own numbers, getting in each other's way, striking too quick or too soon, and cutting empty air. But they swarm about him, yelling and hacking, as still *more* awakened sleepers rush through the arched doorways.

Conan, bleeding from a cut on the temple, clears a space with a sweep of his dripping saber and casts a quick glance about for an avenue of escape.

CUT TO:

INTERIOR: XUTHAL - THE UNLIT CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS.

THALIS AND NATALA.

Natala fights wildly, but to no avail. Thalís is much stronger than Natala; she picks her up and carries her down the corridor like a child, laughing lasciviously. At first, Natala simply cringes in Thalís' grip, then her fluttering hand closes on a jeweled dagger-hilt jutting from Thalís' girdle. She jerks it out and strikes blindly with all her strength.

Thalís screams and staggers, and Natala slips from her grasp and falls to the floor. Rising, she scurries to the nearest wall and stands there panting and trembling, flattening herself against the stones. Thalís curses steadily and furiously.

(They still can't see each other. Perhaps we are seeing them as if with infra-red vision)

THALIS

Where are you, you little she-devil? Let me  
get my fingers on you and I'll break your

neck! I'll rip your guts out with my bare hands!

Natala cowers against the wall at Thalís' threats. In her blind groping, Thalís finds a radium gem imbedded in the wall. She rubs it, and a reddish glow springs up. One hand is pressed to her side and blood trickles between her fingers. But she is not weakened or badly hurt; the flesh wound is only superficial. Her face is contorted with hellish passion. She takes her hand away from her wounded side, shakes the blood drops from her fingers impatiently, and advances pantherishly on Natala. Natala sags, limp with terror.

THALIS  
Give me that dagger, you fool!

She snatches the dagger from Natala's lax fingers, and throws it contemptuously aside.

THALIS  
You little slut!  
(She slaps Natala viciously with either hand)  
Before I drag you down the corridor and throw you into Thog's jaws, I'll have a little of your blood myself! You would dare to knife me - well, for that audacity you shall pay!

Seizing her by the hair, Thalís drags her down the corridor a short distance, to the edge of the circle of light. A metal ring shows on the wall, above the level of a man's head. From it hangs a silken cord. Nearby, a jewel-handled whip hangs on the wall. Thalís strips off Natala's tunic, then jerks up her wrists and binds them to the ring. Natala hangs there naked, her feet barely touching the floor.

Thalís unhooks the whip, which has lashes consisting of seven round silk cords. She hisses vindictively as she draws back her arm and lashes Natala across the loins. Natala writhes, twists, and tears agonizedly at the thongs which imprison her wrists, and screams with anguish. But as she twists and shrieks, she suddenly freezes, staring with horror as something looms out of the shadows behind Thalís.

CUT TO:

INTERIOR: XUTHAL - THE CURRENT CHAMBER - CONTINUOUS.

CONAN AND THE XUTHALI WARRIORS.

Conan has just felled several Xuthalis with a sweep of his sword, and is looking for an out.

PAN TO:

A tapestry on one of the walls is drawn aside, revealing a narrow stairway on which stands a richly-robed man, vague-eyed and blinking as if not yet fully awake. Conan instantly leaps through the hemming ring of swords. He bounds toward the stair with the pack howling behind him. Three men confront him at the foot of the steps, and he strikes them with a deafening clash of steel. The three Xuthalis resist him for a frenzied instant, then the group falls apart and Conan springs up the stairs. The screaming horde trips over the three bodies writhing at the foot of the stairs: one lying face down in his own blood and brains, one propped up on his arms as blood spurts from his throat, and one howling and clawing at the bloody stump of his arm.

As Conan rushes up the stair, the man above draws a sword and thrusts downward as Conan surges upon him. Conan ducks deeply, and as the blade slits the skin of his back, he straightens, driving his saber upward with all his power into the belly of his enemy. Without slowing he caroms against the body, knocking it sidewise, and crashing against the opposite wall. The other, the saber torn through his body, falls headlong down the stair, ripped open to the spine from groin to breastbone, against the men rushing up the stair and bearing them backwards.

Conan, half-stunned, leans against the wall for an instant, glaring down upon his pursuers; then, with a defiant shake of his bloody saber, he bounds up the steps.

CUT TO:

INTERIOR: XUTHAL - THE SECRET CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS.

NATALA, THALIS, AND THOG.

Thalis has been lost in the savage ecstasy of her torture, but at the change in Natala, she whirls quick as a cat, but too late. She sways back, her arms flung up as an awful cry rings from her lips. She stands for an instant, a white figure of fear etched against a great black shapeless mass that towers over her. Then she is whipped off her feet; the shadow recedes with her into the darkness beyond the dim circle of light, and Natala is left hanging alone in the dim light.

From the black shadows come incomprehensible blood-freezing sounds. Thalis pleads frenziedly, but no voice answers.

THALIS

(hysterical and desperate, gasping)

No, no, not me, take her, take her, she  
doesn't worship you like I do, no, please...

Thalis' panting voice suddenly rises to screams of agony, then

breaks into hysterical laughter, mingled with sobs. This dwindles to a convulsive panting, and presently ceases entirely, leaving a terrible silence.

Natala twists about and stares fearfully in the direction the black shape had carried Thalís. She dares not make a sound, but can't still her panting. Then a whimpering gasp escapes her lips as the darkness starts to take shape. Something huge and bulky grows up out of the void.

CUT TO:

INTERIOR: XUTHAL - THE HEAD OF THE STAIRS - CONTINUOUS.

Conan comes into an upper chamber, and scans it to see that it is empty. Behind him the horde is yelling with intensified horror and rage, indicating that he has killed some notable man of the city.

He runs at random, without plan, through dark or dimly-lit chambers, harried by all the warriors of Xuthal, and eventually blunders into a chamber into which his foes are just pouring.

They yell vengefully and rush for him, and with a snarl of disgust he turns and flees back the way he came. But all the chambers look alike.

INTERIOR: XUTHAL - THE SECRET CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS.

NATALA AND THOG.

A giant misshapen 'head' emerges into the light. A great toad-like 'face' seems to contain great pools of light that might be horizontally slit-pupilled 'eyes' that blink at her. Natala groans with terror at the cosmic lust in those 'eyes'. The creature's outline seems to waver and alter subtly as she stares at it, yet it's substance seems solid. It seems to be alternately both taller and shorter than Natala. Moving by an incomprehensible means of locomotion, it moves into the light, but it seems to be impervious to light, neither reflecting nor absorbing light. Only the blinking toad-like face, warty, fanged, and tusked, stands out. A dark, squidlike tentacle, bearing teeth instead of suckers, slides around her body; she shudders uncontrollably at its touch and screams as if her throat would burst. As she continues to scream throat-ripping screams, the creature tugs at her as if to tear her from the ring by brute force.

CUT TO:

INTERIOR: XUTHAL - A SERIES OF CHAMBERS ON THE UPPER FLOOR - CONTINUOUS.

CONAN FLEEING.

At last he races into a particularly ornate chamber, which is occupied by a Xuthali woman who raises up with a cry as he charges in.

She is loaded with jewelled ornaments but is otherwise nude, staring at him with wide, frightened eyes. She raises her hand and jerks a silken rope hanging from the wall. The floor opens under him and he plunges into the black depths beneath.

CUT TO:

INTERIOR: XUTHAL - DIMLY LIT CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS.

Conan hits the floor of the corridor cat-like on his feet and one hand, saber in guard position in his other hand. He hears Natala's terrified screams as he rebounds snarling to his feet, and sees her writhing in the lustful grip of the black nightmare shape of Thog. Without hesitation he bounds forward to smite the monster.

It drops Natala and wheels toward Conan. Conan's saber, shrilling through the air, shears clear through the black viscous flesh and rings on the stone floor, showering blue sparks. Conan goes to his knees from the fury of the blow, as it does not encounter the resistance he had expected. As he bounds back up, the towering black shape is upon him.

It flows about him like a clinging black cloud, engulfing him. His madly slashing saber shears through it again and again, his ripping poniard tears and rends it; slimy black phosphorescent liquid deluges him. Yet its fury is unabated as its flesh seems to knit behind his slashing blades. He is tossed violently to and fro; mandibles bite him, massive limbs club him, claws scabble at his skin, toothed tentacles squeeze him, whip-like appendages lash him. They are rolling around on the ground. At one point he sinks his teeth into its substance, and the flesh writhes away from between his jaws.

They roll across the floor in a hurricane of battle. Conan's breath is coming in whistling gasps between his teeth. Its toad-like face looms above him. With a agonized panting cry he makes a desperate lunge toward it with his saber. It sinks hilt-deep somewhere below the grisly face, and the vast bulk heaves convulsively.

With a titanic burst of expansion and contraction it tumbles backwards, rolling with frantic haste down the corridor. Conan, bruised, battered, bloody but indomitable, hangs on like a bulldog to the hilt of his saber, which he cannot withdraw, tearing and ripping the shuddering bulk with the poniard in his left hand, goring it to ribbons. Conan and Thog are both covered in the creature's black, phosphorescent blood.

Suddenly the heaving billowing mass falls away from beneath Conan, the saber tearing loose from the flesh and remaining in his locked hand. This hand and arm hang down into space, and far below him

Thog's glowing body rushes down like a meteor. Conan is lying on the brink of a great round well, the edge of which is slimy stone. He lies there, watching the hurtling glow dwindling and dwindling until it vanishes into a dark shining surface that seems to surge upward to meet it. For an instant a dimming light glimmers in the dusky depths, then it disappears, and Conan lies staring down into the blackness of the silent abyss.

FADE TO:

INTERIOR: XUTHAL - DIMLY LIT CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS.

Natala is hanging from the silk cords that bind her wrists. A footstep is heard, then Conan emerges from the darkness. She emits a shriek of horror as Conan becomes fully visible, and his appalling condition becomes plain to see. At every step he drips blood. His face is skinned and bruised as if beaten with a bludgeon, his lips are pulped, and blood oozes down his face from a wound in his scalp. There are deep gashes on his thighs, calves, and forearms, and great bruises show on his limbs and body from impacts against the stone floor. His shoulders, back, and upper chest have suffered most. The flesh is bruised, swollen, and lacerated, the skin hanging in loose strips, as if he had been lashed with wire whips.

NATALA

(sobbing)

Oh, Conan, what has happened to you?

His smashed lips writhe in grim humor as he approaches her. His hairy chest, glistening with sweat and blood, heaves with his panting. Slowly and laboriously he reaches up and cuts her cords, then he falls back against the wall and leans there, his trembling legs braced wide.

Natala falls to the floor when he cuts the cords, then scrambles up and catches him in a frenzied embrace, sobbing hysterically.

NATALA

Oh, Conan, you are wounded unto death! Oh, what shall we do?

CONAN

(panting)

Well, you can't fight a devil out of hell and come off with a whole skin!

NATALA

Where is *It*? Did you kill it?

CONAN

I don't know. It fell into a pit. It was hanging in bloody shreds, but whether it can

be killed by steel I know not.

NATALA

(wringing her hands)

Oh, your poor back!

CONAN

(grimacing in pain)

It lashed me with a tentacle. It cut like wire and burned like poison. But it was its damnable squeezing that got my wind. It was worse than a python. If half my guts are not mashed out of place, I'm much mistaken.

NATALA

(whimpering)

What shall we do?

He glances up at the trapdoor. It is closed. No sound comes from above.

CONAN

We can't go back through the secret door. That room is full of dead men, and doubtless warriors keep watch there. They must have thought my doom sealed when I plunged through the floor above, or else they dare not follow me into this tunnel.

(gestures at a radium gem on the wall)

...Twist that radium gem off the wall...

As I groped my way back up the corridor I felt arches opening into other tunnels.

We'll follow the first we come to. It may lead to another pit, or to the open air. We must chance it. We can't stay here and rot.

Natala has obeyed his instruction, and hands it to him. Holding the glowing gem in his left hand and his bloody saber in his right, he starts down the corridor. He goes slowly, stiffly, only his animal vitality keeping him on his feet. His bloodshot eyes glare blankly and he involuntarily licks his battered lips from time to time.

Presently the dim light shows a black arch, and he turns into this. The light reveals a tunnel similar to the one they are leaving.

They continue down the new tunnel and eventually come to a long stair, which they climb until they come to a stone door, fastened with a golden bolt.

Natala hesitates, glancing at Conan. He is swaying on his feet, the light in his unsteady hand throwing fantastic shadows back and forth along the wall.

CONAN

(muttering thickly)

Open the door, girl. The men of Xuthal will be waiting for us, and I would not disappoint them. By Crom, the city has not seen such a sacrifice as I will make.

She takes the gem from his blood-stained hand, throws the bolt, and draws the panel inward, revealing the backside of a cloth-of-gold tapestry. She draws it aside, and cautiously peeks through. The chamber beyond is empty. A silvery fountain tinkles in the center.

Conan rests his hand heavily on her shoulder.

CONAN

(mumbling)

Stand aside, girl. Now is the feasting of swords.

NATALA

There is no one in the chamber. But there is water -

CONAN

I hear it.

(licks his lips)

We will drink before we die.

He stares blindly into the chamber. She takes his darkly stained hand and leads him through the stone door. She is on tiptoe, nervous.

CONAN

Drink while I keep watch.

NATALA

No, I am not thirsty. Lie down beside the fountain and I will bathe your wounds.

CONAN

What of the swords of Xuthal?

He continually rakes his arm across his eyes as if to clear his blurred sight.

NATALA

I hear no one. All is silent.

He sinks down gropingly by the fountain and plunges his face in the jet, drinking greedily. While he drinks, she tears strips from the silk hanging, using Conan's poniard. When he raises his head there is sanity in his bloodshot eyes, and he stretches his limbs out on the marble floor, but keeps his saber in his hand, and his eyes continually rove toward the archways. She bathes his torn flesh and bandages the deeper wounds with the strips torn from the silk hanging. The flesh of his back is discolored, mottled and spotted black and blue and sickly yellow. She shudders at the sight, but is also worrying about the danger they are still in.

As she finishes her task, she suddenly freezes and stares.

PAN TO:

A HANGING THAT PARTIALLY CONCEALS AN ALCOVE.

Under the hanging a hand's breadth of yellow flesh shows.

CUT TO:

CONAN AND NATALA.

Saying nothing, she rises and crosses the chamber softly, grasping Conan's poniard. With agonized stealth, she cautiously draws aside the hanging. On the dais lies a young Xuthali woman, naked and motionless. At her hand stands a jade jar nearly full of the golden wine of Xuthal. Slowly Natala leans across the body and grasps the vessel, her poniard poised above the girl's bosom.

Holding the jar, Natala hesitates, staring hard at the unconscious girl's breast, knife still poised. After a long moment, she sighs and draws back the hanging and returns to Conan, who seems only semi-conscious.

She bends and places the jar to his lips. He drinks, mechanically at first, then with suddenly roused interest. Then he sits up and takes the jar from her hands. When he lifts his face, his eyes are clear and normal, and his expression is lively. His voice is clear, not the previous mumble of delirium.

CONAN

CROM! Where did you get this?

NATALA

From that alcove, where a yellow hussy is sleeping.

He drinks more of the golden liquid.

CONAN

By Crom! I feel new life and power rush  
like wildfire through my veins. Surely this  
is the very elixir of Life!

He rises, picking up his saber.

NATALA

We had best go back into the corridor. We  
shall be discovered if we stay here long.  
We can hide there until your wounds heal.

CONAN

Not I! We are not rats, to hide in dark  
burrows. We leave this devil-city now, and  
let none seek to stop us.

NATALA

But your wounds!

CONAN

I do not feel them. It may be a false  
strength this liquor has given me, but I  
swear I am aware of neither pain or  
weakness.

With sudden purpose he crosses the chamber to a window and looks out.  
She looks over his shoulder. A breeze tosses their hair.

PAN TO:

INTERIOR: XUTHAL - THE FOUNTAIN CHAMBER - VIEW THROUGH THE WINDOW -  
NIGHT.

The window is barred with gold bars. Above is a dark velvet sky,  
dusted with stars. Below stretches a vague expanse of sand.

CUT TO:

CONAN AND NATALA.

CONAN

Thalis said the city was one great palace.  
Evidently some of the chambers are built  
like towers on the wall. This one is.  
Chance has led us well.

NATALA

What do you mean?  
(glancing apprehensively over her  
shoulder)

CONAN

(pointing at a crystal jar on an ivory table)

Take that jar and fill it with water, and tie a strip of that torn hanging about its neck for a handle while I rip up this tapestry.

While Natala obeys his instructions, Conan rapidly ties together the long tough strips of silk to make a rope, and fastens one end to the leg of the massive ivory table.

CONAN

We'll take our chance with the desert. Thalís spoke of an oasis a day's march to the south, and grasslands beyond that. If we reach the oasis we can rest there until my wounds heal. This wine is like sorcery. A little while ago I was little more than a dead man; now I am ready for anything.

(gesturing)

Here is enough silk left for you to make a garment of.

Natala begins knotting the silk about her naked body, and Conan turns to the window, and with a contemptuous wrench tears away the soft gold bars that guard it. Then he loops the loose end of the silk rope about Natala's hips.

CONAN

Hold on with both hands.

He lifts her through the window and lowers her the thirty-odd feet to the sand. She steps out of the loop, and drawing it back up, he makes fast the vessels of water and wine, and lowers them to her. He follows them, sliding down swiftly, hand over hand.

CUT TO:

EXTERIOR: OUTSIDE THE WALLS OF XUTHAL - NIGHT.

As he reaches her side, Natala sighs with relief. They stand alone at the foot of the great wall. Conan slings the precious jars across his shoulders, wincing at the contact with his mangled flesh.

CONAN

They may find the rope. They may even pursue us, but from what Thalís said, I doubt it.

(he points)

That way is south, so somewhere in that direction lies the oasis. Come!

Gently taking her hand, he strides out across the sands, suiting his stride to her shorter legs. He does not glance back at the silent, brooding city.

FADE TO:

EXTERIOR: THE DESERT - NIGHT.  
They are still walking.

NATALA

Conan, when you fought the monster, and later, as you came back up the corridor, did you see anything of ... of Thalís?

CONAN

(shakes his head)

It was dark in the corridor, but it was empty.

NATALA

(shudders)

She tortured me - yet I pity her.

CONAN

(snarling)

It was a hot welcome we got in that accursed city.

(with a return of grim humor)

Well, they'll remember our visit long enough, I'll wager. There are brains and guts and blood to be cleaned off their marble tiles, and if their god still lives, he carries more wounds than I. We got off light, after all: we have wine and water and a good chance of reaching a habitable country, though I look as if I'd gone through a meat-grinder, and you have a sore-

NATALA

(interrupting)

It's all your fault. If you had not looked so long and admiringly at that Stygian cat -

CONAN

(raises his eyes imploringly to the sky)

Crom and his devils! When the oceans drown the world, women will take time for jealousy. Devil take their conceit! Did I tell the Stygian to fall in love with me? After all, she was only human!

**\*END\***