The Crawler in the Mists!
At first, the motion is not unlike the monotonous rolling of waves lapping softly against the shore, then the constant movement becomes a ragged bumping.

And a sullen-eyed barbarian struggles back to consciousness to find himself, not on some great slave ship prowling the Argosian shore, but rather on a ship of the desert...

...a foul-smelling camel!

Eh? Wh-where am I? What's happening here?

Welcome back to the land of the living, my friend. You have slept for quite some time.

Who are you, little man? What am I doing astride this ugly beast?

I am called Rasto, barbarian. I am a trader bound for the marketplace at Messantia, my fellows and I found you lying unconscious along the shore so we thought we'd take you with us, rather than leave you as food for the vultures.

So you bound me with this length of chain... but to protect me from those birds, I take it.

As I told you, my friend, I am a trader... and you are a piece of valuable merchandise which will bring a most tidy sum indeed on the Messantian slave block.

And what makes you think I'm ever going to reach that slave-block you shriveled, little worm?

Well, there's certainly no way you can escape me, barbarian. The other end of the chain that binds you is shackled to my wrist, accept it, my friend... you're my prisoner!
But since this chain indeed has two ends, little worm... who is to say which of us is really the prisoner here?

By Ishtar! The barbarian yanked little Rasto out of his saddle as if he were no more than a child!

Do we allow the dog to get away with that, my brethren?

If you had half the brains you were born with, fools, you would turn tail and run, but since I'm certain you do not...

Let us get on with the battle and be done with it!

Alone and unarmed you challenge us thus, barbarian?

Come forward and see.

Then stand your ground, dog, and die!!

Howling like wild desert wolves, the traders charge forth, their scimitars glinting in the sunlight... and a fire-eyed Cimmerian meets their attack gladly, his teeth bared and snarling...

Watch out! The crazy barbarian is using Rasto as a flail to... Unnff!
HE'S WHIRLING THE LITTLE ONE AROUND ON THE END OF THAT CHAIN LIKE A...

...HUUNH!

LOOK OUT! OUR CAMELS! OUR CAMELS!

OW!

OOOFFF!
ENOUGH, BARBARIAN... WE YIELD.

YOU HAVE SCATTERED OUR CAMELS... BEATEN US SENSELESS...

FRANKLY, YOU ARE MORE TROUBLE THAN YOU ARE WORTH.

BEGONE, BARBARIAN... AND GOOD RIDDANCE TO YOU.

FREE ME FROM THIS Cursed SHACKLE, LITTLE WORM... AND I WILL GLADLY BE ON MY WAY.

C-Certainly, Barbarian... I have the KEY right here in my robes.

WHAT IS IT, LITTLE WORM?

TH-the KEY! In the heat of battle, I seem to have... ER... LOST it somewhere in the sand.

BEL'S BONES! IT FIGURES! Well, little worm, if I want to leave here, it seems I'll have to REMOVE your scrawny wrist to REMOVE your shackle...

R-REMOVE m-my w-wrist?
...or take you with me until I can find someone to free us from these cursed chains.

M-my wrist

Oh, don't worry, little worm—
I'll leave you your precious wrist. What good, after all, is a one-handed trader? Such as you needs both hands free to pick your customer's purse!

Now come—climb up in the saddle behind me—and let us be gone!

You can move swiftly for one so small and twisted, little worm.

Would you rather I dragged you along behind me?

C-climb in the saddle... b-behind you?

Given such a choice, wouldn't you, barbarian wouldn't you?

Get on you ugly beast—get on!
WE HAVE BEEN TRAVELING FOR MANY HOURS NOW, BARBARIAN. ARE YOU CERTAIN YOU KNOW WHERE WE ARE GOING?

YOU WERE BOUND FOR THE MARKETPLACE AT MESSANTIA. IT SEEMS AS GOOD A DESTINATION AS ANY.

THEN WHY ARE WE TRAVELING IN THIS DIRECTION, BARBARIAN?

MESSANTIA LIES TO THE SOUTH.

SO DO YOUR COMPANIONS, LITTLE WORM. WE STRIKE OUR OWN COURSE FOR MESSANTIA, ONE WITH LESS CHANCE OF...

EYES OF ISHTAR! ON THAT RISE BEFORE US...

A CITY! BUT THERE IS NO CITY ON THE DESERT SANDS... UNLESS...

FOR A CHANGE, FORTUNE SMILES ON US, LITTLE WORM. IT'S GROWING DARK. YONDER WILL MAKE A FINE PLACE TO PASS THE NIGHT... AND TO FINALLY RIDE MYSELF OF THIS SHACKLE... AND YOU!
BARBARIAN--WAIT!
I PRAY YOU, PASS
THAT CITY BY!
LET US FIND
OTHER LODGINGS
FOR THE NIGHT!

WHAT ARE YOU
JABBERING ABOUT
LITTLE WORM? A
CITY AWAITS TO
WELCOME US,
AND YOU'D
RATHER HAVE US
SLEEP UNDER
SOME DESERT
ROCK!

PLEASE, BARBARIAN, I HAVE
HEARD LEGENDS OF THIS CITY
IN THE SANDS, LEGENDS OF A
HIDEOUS CREATURE THAT PROWLS
IT'S STREETS BY NIGHT...

...CARRYING HUMAN VICTIMS OFF TO
IT'S HIDDEN LAIR SOMEWHERE IN
THE RUINS AT THE CITY'S EDGE.
IN THE NAME OF SANITY, BLACK
MANE, LET US PASS THIS DREADFUL
PLACE BY.

I AM WEARY, LITTLE
WORM, AND THAT CITY
OFFERS THE PROMISE
OF A SOFT BED...
AND MORE.

NO BUTS, LITTLE WORM. THAT
CITY IS WHERE WE ARE GOING AND
THE WAY I AM FEELING RIGHT
NOW, ANY MONSTER THAT
DARES ATTACK ME, DOES SO
AT IT'S OWN PERIL!

NOW MOVE ON, YOU
FOUL- SMELLING BRUTE
--AND STOP
COMPLAINING

GOOD EVENING,
CITIZEN. CAN YOU
TELL ME WHERE
TO FIND A
BLACKSMITH
WHO COULD...

GO AWAY,
STRANGER!
LEAVE KAMALLA
WHILE YOU STILL
HAVE THE
CHANCE
YOU WERE RIGHT LITTLE WORM. THE PEOPLE HERE ARE NOT EXACTLY WHAT YOU WOULD CALL HOSPITABLE.

PLEASE, BARBARIAN... LET US FOLLOW THE MAN'S ADVICE!

SILENCE, WORM! THERE MUST BE SOMEONE HERE WILLING TO TALK TO US.

YOU WERE SAYING BARBARIAN? LOOK AROUND YOU. THE PEOPLE SLAM SHUT THEIR DOORS AND WINDOWS AS WE APPROACH. WE ARE OBVIOUSLY NOT WANTED HERE, MY FRIEND.
Perhaps not, little worm—but we are still staying, even if we must spend the night right here in the city square!

Here, barbarian?

Aye, little worm. These cobblestones will make as soft a pillow for our heads as any desert rock.

Good night, little worm. Try not to rattle the chains, will you. I sleep lightly.

6-good night, barbarian.
B-BARBARIAN, HELP M-- UUMMPH!

Eh? What is... EYES OF ISHTAR!

Some great, misshapen slug has grabbed hold of the little worm, dragging me along by the chain on my wrist. I got to pull free before...
BY ERLIK!
The creature snapped the chain as if it were only twine!

I've got to free the little worm while there's still...

My head—reeling...have to regain my footing, then...

Barbarian, heeeelp meeeee!
CROM! The slug-thing has carried Little Rasto off into the mists; I'm rid of them both then. All I need do is mount up and ride off. There's nothing more to keep me here...

...except, curse it all, that I've grown unusually fond of that twisted little man!

It appears there's no other course open to me but to follow that milky-white crawler into the mists--and bring little Rasto back.

It seems Little Rasto spoke true; the crawler has indeed carried him to these ruins at the city's edge. Now all I have to do is find them before...

There! Slithering into the crumbling shell of that temple, it's them!

But I can still reach them before they're lost in the darkness of...
ANOTHER SLUG-BEAST COAL BLACK WHERE THE FIRST ONE WAS WHITE!

IT BARS MY PATH! SLITHERS FORWARD AS IF TO ATTACK!

WELL, IF IT'S BATTLE IT SEEMS—THEN BATTLE IT HAS FOUND!

CROM, THIS CREATURE'S FLESH IS HARDER THAN HYRKAIA STEEL! MY BLADE CANNOT PIERCE ITS... HUHNN!

CURSE THOSE WRITHING TENTACLES! IF ONE OF THEM GETS A GRIP ON ME, IT COULD CRUSH MY CHEST TO PULP! BUT IF MY SWORD CANNOT SLAY THE BEAST, THEN WHAT...?

THAT TALL STONE PILLAR!
IT'S ALREADY CRACKED AND RUTTED WITH AGE AND THE BLOW THAT CREATURE'S TENTACLE JUST DEALT IT HAS NOT IMPROVED IT'S CONDITION.

IF I CAN MANAGE TO WEAKEN ITS SUPPORT, THEN LURE THE MONSTER INTO PLACE... YES, IT JUST MIGHT WORK!

BY ERLIK! I WISH I HAD A STURDY AXE TO USE UPON THIS PILLAR, BUT IT SEEMS MY SWORD SERVES JUST AS WELL. FRAGMENTS OF THE STONE FALL AWAY, EVEN AS THE CREATURE DRAWS NEAR!

THE BEAST IS ALMOST IN PLACE... I'VE GOT TO... PUT MY BACK INTO IT... SEND THIS PILLAR... TOPPLING OVER... ON... THAT... CURSED... MONSTER!
EYES OF ISHTAR! WHAT SORCERY IS THIS? WIRES AND COILS JUT FROM THE SLAIN CREATURE'S BROKEN BACK... WIRES THAT LEAP AND CONGEAL AS IF LIGHTNING LIVED WITHIN THEM!

There is more madness afoot here than readily meets the eye...

...I'm not so sure I want to know from whence it came... but...

The white-fleshed creature's trail is easily followed, a ribbon of slime that leads deep into this crumbling temple, but where... Crom!

Light up ahead! Apparently my questions have answers.

There--before that shimmering veil of light--the ivory-skinned slug... Thing and Raeto!
PATIENCE, LITTLE WORM. A MOMENT LONGER—AND MY SWORD WILL SET YOU FREE!

BARBARIAN—WAIT! YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU ARE DOING! THAT CREATURE MUST NOT BE SLAIN!

YOU SPEAK NONSENSE, LITTLE WORM. THAT MONSTER HAS BEWITCHED YOU BUT STILL I'LL...

STOP WHERE YOU ARE, CONAN OF CIMMERIA... FOR THE SAKE OF US ALL.

THAT VOICE—THUNDERING INSIDE MY HEAD! BUT WHAT—? WHO?
I AM M'NAJ... HE WHO YOU CALLED MONSTER. I AM THE LAST OF MY RACE, FOR CENTURIES, I HAVE DWELT HERE... ALONE. BUT FOR THE MECHANICAL COMPANION I CREATED FOR MYSELF.

...THE AUTOMATION YOU SO CALLOUSLY DESTROYED OUTSIDE IN THE MISTS FOR NO GOOD REASON.

MY LIFE IS ALL THE REASON THAT I NEED THE COMPANY OF THE CREATURE.


NOW DO YOU SEE BARBARIAN? NOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND?
COME, LITTLE ONE... IT IS TIME FOR US TO GO. THERE IS NOTHING MORE TO KEEP US HERE.

NO! COME BACK! YOU CAN'T!

I CANNOT PASS THROUGH THIS SHIMMERING VEIL... BUT RASTO AND THE MONSTER HAD NO TROUBLE IN... RASTO?

M-Y EYES MUST DECEIVE ME (BEYOND THE VEIL), A GREAT GOLDEN REALM, BEAUTIFUL HANDSOME PEOPLE, LAUGHING, FROLICKING... AND... RASTO!

RASTO... NO LONGER frail and twisted, but standing straight--and tall--and full of life! I MUST SEE MORE! I MUST... NO! THE VEIL BEGINS TO CLOUD, OBSCURING MY VIEW!

LET ME THROUGH, CURSE YOU! LET ME THROUGH!
NO, CIMMERIAN, THOUGH IT SORRELY GRIEVES ME, I CANNOT LET YOU PASS. THERE IS NO PLACE FOR YOU BEYOND THE VEIL SO LONG AS THERE IS SUCH FURY IN YOUR HEART, SUCH VIOLENCE IN YOUR SOUL.

FORGIVE ME, CONAN... BUT THERE IS NO PLACE FOR SWORD-WIELDING SERPENT... IN PARADISE.

IT'S GONE... RASTO... THE MONSTER... THE VEIL... ALL OF IT... GONE.

HEAD BOWED, JAW CLENCHED CONAN OF CIMMERIA TURNS AWAY FROM THE RUINS...

STRIDING SOLEMNLY BACK TO HIS MOUNT WAITING IN THE VILLAGE SQUARE.

WITHOUT ANOTHER WORD, THE BARBARIAN SLIDES INTO THE SADDLE AND RIDES AWAY,

LEAVING THE CITY IN THE DESERT WASTES... AND THE GATES OF PARADISE... FAR FROM HIM...
POWERful

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CONAN
THE BARBARIAN