

Temple Of The UNDEAD

By
John Caliber

With
**Phil Campbell,
Paul Dunlop,
Graham Sanders,
Allan Stenhouse**

Chapter 1

The First of Klarmont, the first official day of summer, and Karamaikos is resplendent in greenery and birdsong. The rough beauty of the northern Karamaikan frontier lands is lost on a small band of adventurers, their having crossed so much of it slowly by foot for three days. Encouragingly, the horizon has seen a gradual shift from pine forest to the tips of the Black Peak Mountains, their destination. Will fortune and glory await these brave souls, or a violent and bloody death?

The group – two men, one Hin and a dwarf - have travelled north to Verge along Windrush Road from the Elven outpost of Rifllian. The temptations of an extensive cavern complex somewhere up in those dark peaks urge them on, despite the warnings from the Callarii elves of Rifllian and the hearty but sincere halfling landlord of the Silver Swan: 'You don't see all in the mountains until they find you and make you their permanent tenants. Don't you be fooled by the sunlight streaming into the forests – don't underestimate what lies in those spindly shadows.' The landlord looked sideways at the halfling called Fergel. 'You been off the weed for too long, M'boy ... lost your reason, going with these rascals!'

The village of Verge stands within an artificial clearing. The felled trees have been reconstituted as the village's outer stockade, a tightly bound succession of wooden trunks terminating in conical spikes. Smoke rises from stone chimneys protruding lopsidedly from pitched, thatched roofs within the stockade.

It is then that the Dwarvish adventurer called Ferro Blackhelm sights the body, lying barely visible in a clump of long grass beside the road. The group advance closer and notice the clothing of a typical Traladaran freeman, topped by a shock of dark brown hair. He lays face upwards, eyes wide and glazed like wax spheres.

Erik Von Braden, mercenary-for-hire, kneels down by the body's side and inspects it with his eyes, his fingers touching the hilt of a throwing knife, prepared for a surprise. The body remains still – and lifeless, as Erik confirms. A burgundy stain along the Traladaran's neck reveals a vital clue to his demise.

'Vampire,' states Erik, 'or Nosferatu, if the kill was made during this day. The undead are rife in these parts!'

The other man resident in the group, Colum Darken, lately of Glantri and as mysterious as that country's reputation joins Von Braden. The tall, lanky wizard brushes his long, black hair aside as he kneels. 'The stench of death is fairly recent; let me take a look.' Colum reaches out and touches the blood on the man's neck. The blood has crusted, but pressure from Colum's fingertips manages to release a string-thin sliver of thick, wet blood. Colum rubs it in his fingers, smelling it before tasting the end of his fingers. 'Rare vintage.'

The heavy stone of Windrush Road grants notice of new arrivals, the many clip-clops of horses. Four riders approach the adventurers, mounted upon sturdy Dales. Their dress – light leather armour, sallet helmets, sword and buckler – identify them as soldiers of Verge. Far from Specularum, their armour is left unattended to weather and rot, but the soldiers' poise is proud. 'Explain yourselves strangers!' Shouts the captain of the soldiers.

Von Braden raises his hand slowly in a gesture of peace. 'The poor wretch behind us has met with some untimely, and most gruesome fate at the hands of some dark denizen of the forest. Examine his neck and you will surely exonerate us of any suspicion you may have of us.'

The captain nods at a second, who leads the other two soldiers around you, cutting off obvious escape routes. Once the perimeter is secured, the lead soldier dismounts. 'Back away from the body, leaving your hands unguarded,' he commands. He leans over the body, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword as though expecting mischief. 'I'm satisfied you did not kill this man,' he speaks. He then kneels beside the body and rolls him over. 'Vassily!'

A hiss escapes the mouth of another soldier. 'By Halav no! The soldiers curse amongst themselves. 'I saw Vassily leave the town with Rurik, his brother, but of Rurik there is no trace.'

The captain indicates the corpse. 'Bring him back to Verge - we will bury him in the proper manner.' Two soldiers dismount to collect Vassily. The captain approaches the adventurers. 'Where do your travels take you? This road is cursed - I warn you to be off it in good speed.'

'We seek adventure and riches in the caverns of the Black Peaks,' answers Von Braden. 'Why do you say the road ahead is cursed? Is there a coven of these bloodsuckers at the end of it? Anything you can tell us will be most helpful in our quest. Maybe we will be able to avenge your murdered comrade-in-arms and free you from the menace of this accursed creature of the night.'

The captain mounts his horse. 'A fiend has haunted this road for many a long day. Only one of our people survived its attack and he has in short order been reduced to insanity.' The captain turns his horse back to Verge. 'There's no point your going on if it is lurking nearby. My men and I are returning to our barracks. You are invited to join us - all travellers can expect a warm welcome in Verge.'

Von Braden smiles. 'What say you, my merry fellows? Shall we take up this fine offer of meagre hospitality? I for one could do with a flagon of ale and a comely wench! I suppose those caverns above are not going anywhere, and this might be our last chance for respite before the coming perils ahead.'

Fergel Sheepdriver rubs his hairy hands together. 'I'll vote for a warm bed and a decent meal, but if we're going anywhere with a whorehouse, you can count me out.' The Hin speaks of past years badly spent indentured in the service of a whoremaster in the vice dens of Specularum, the capital city of Karameikos. The halfling's prodigious organ made him a favourite among high-paying female customers ...

Colum nods in agreement. 'I suppose refreshment and a decent place to meditate would be most welcome. I could try and research some

information on what lies ahead - there's bound to be some local knowledge of the caves.'

Von Braden laughs. 'That's nice to know, Wizard. I just hope your purse is full of coinage, as methinks the first round is on you!'

Verge is one of the smallest outposts in northern Karameikos with barely threescore buildings, most inhabited by small families, mainly Traladaran freemen, though Thyatian settlers are to be found without too much searching. The Traladarans proudly maintain their traditional culture, while the Thyatians are responsible for injecting select wares of the nations of the Known World into the staid, superstitious morass that is Traladaran society. Set further towards the village's hub are larger structures, the headquarters of local businesses. Situated at the very centre of Verge is the home of Lord and Lady Antonic, further distinguished by a freshly-thatched roof and a fringe of glistening metal talismans fringing the roofline, swaying in the wind and casting fleeting shadows along the cobbled streets.

The adventurers have been escorted into the centre of Verge by the soldier captain. He turns his horse to leave. 'I advise you to make introductions to Lord and Lady Antonic; they do not like to have adventurers pass by their door without notice.' The soldier taps his sallet at you. 'Fare well. We may break bread together before you leave.'

A guard admits the group to Lord and Lady Antonic's home. The main hall is small as one might expect from the capital of such a modest village, but finds room for a high and low table where the courtesans feast and the nobles hold sway. Though it is summer, the mountain air calls for a fire to burn at all times, filling the rafters with a dark, grey pall. Fat candles burn to give support to the light filtering softly in through open portals set into the wooden walls. Servants are busy preparing the tables for the midday feast.

A herald announces the adventurers' arrival. Lord Antonic rounds the low table to inspect them. He is a tall, youthful man of great build with short, brown hair, moustache and beard dressed in gold garments rich with colourful trimmings. 'I bid you greetings, strangers ... friends. You're welcome to join my table. I'm certain we have lots to learn from each other.'

Von Braden bowed before the Lord. 'Good day to you, my fine Lord; Erik Von Braden, gentleman and adventurer of Karameikos at your service. These are my companions Colum Darken, Ferro Blackhelm and the little fellow is Fergel Sheepdriver. As we are visiting your fine village, we thought it would be courteous to pay homage to your fine home and company.'

Lord Antonic has the group follow him to the high table, where he is seated. 'Enjoy the freedom to be seated and to pluck food from my table as you would from your own.' The table is laid with game birds, honeycomb, sweet pies, giant porcupine meat and flagons of wine.

As the assembled eat, Lady Antonic joins the table, sitting beside her husband. She wears green robes and her long, red hair flows freely

down her back. A golden brooch identifies her as an important figure in the Specularum Magicians' guild. Lady Antonic nods at Colum. 'We are honoured to have another magician in our presence, Husband,' she states.

Lord Antonic raises an eyebrow. 'Indeed! Your band is a varied one,' he observes.

'Indeed.' Despite himself, Ferro finds himself slightly awed by the air of nobility that the Antonics display. 'We are travelling together in search of adventure. We travel towards the hills, but your offer of hospitality was too good to pass up.'

Ferro takes his fill from the feast on the table in front of him. In-between giant mouthfuls, he grunts and belches with satisfaction. He then puts his food to one side and takes a swig from a flagon before he continues. 'Colum - why don't you tell our generous hosts more about our destination?'

'Ahem.' Colum clears his throat. 'I'm not sure there's much to tell M'Lady, as I've been trying to research the contents of the cave system and come up with very little. Maybe there's some local knowledge that you could pass on to us, or point us in the direction of a local expert?' *Mages in power - not much different from home.*

'Indeed, Lord Antonic,' replies Von Braden, 'this would be most helpful. And may I just add, that your food and hospitality is as fine as your Lady is beautiful.' He directs a nod and a smile to the fair Lady Antonic, before resuming eating. 'We have seen the body of a victim of a savage attack beyond this town's walls. Your guards stated it is but one of many ... do you have any knowledge of this miscreant's identity?'

'Your band has a brave heart - and I sympathise with your curiosities about the caves of the Black Peaks,' replies Lord Antonic, 'but I cannot help you. There are no drawings of the caves because nobody has entered the caves and returned.' He leans back in his wooden seat; it creaks beneath his impressive stature. 'They call the caves the 'Heart Of Halav', named after the Immortal founder of the Traladaran culture. Those loyal to Halav are forbidden from going so much as within eyeshot of the cave mouths and the beasts that prowl the vicinity on constant search for food deter the rest.

'I can lend you Alucard, a Traladaran guide who knows the way, but don't expect him to take you beyond the edge of Firefoam River, and don't attempt to bribe him either - the Church Of Halav is strong in these parts and will punish its own severely for transgressing.'

Lady Antonic gently rests her hand against her husband's forearm. 'The fiend you speak of is the nosferatu Gotha. My magical studies have revealed she came out of the Radlebb Woods, recently sired by the vampire Koriszegy. Gotha, a willing victim, desired even greater power and bargained with infernal entities to suffuse her with an even darker evil. I do not yet know why Gotha has come to haunt the woodlands of Verge - other than to feed on our young folk, be she cursed - but I sense she has been lured here by magical energies of a nature unclear to me.'

Fergel sits quietly at the end of the table, listening to the conversation, overawed by the splendour of the dwelling and the finest feast he has seen since he left the Five Shires. At the mention of

vampires, he speaks. 'M' Lady, forgive me for interrupting but do you know of anything that might work against these bloodsuckers?'

'Karamaikan undead are not dissimilar to those of distant Glantri,' Lady Antonic replies. 'They shun holy symbols - in Karamaikos they are the signs of the Churches of Karamaikos, Traladara or the Cult of Halav to a lesser extent - depending on the vampire's upbringing. Garlic, water, salt and prayer repel vampires. If we are so blessed as to capture one, sunlight will vanquish it. Beheading and burning the creature's body and casting its ashes into flowing water will serve the same function.'

Von Braden considers. 'Do you suppose this Gotha has made her lair in the caves of the Black Peaks? Perhaps the evil that has drawn her here is in the caves also.'

Lord Antonic shrugs. 'The caves are quite some distance from here, and Gotha is nosferatu - she has no fear of sunlight. The rumours are that she was once of noble blood; if I were disposed as she, then I would seek out a more luxurious dwelling than an orc's piss hole.' The lord's comment raises polite laughter from the courtesans sat at the low table.

Von Braden looks across at Colum. 'Whatever, I think we'll see just how fine a mage you are, Darken. I've a funny feeling magic will prove to be the order of the day here. Orcs and other nasties I can slay, but, when it comes to supernatural entities and the like, a mage always has the upper hand.'

'I think the lure of Darker Powers is always strong to wizards, witches and the like,' informed Colum. 'It is those that resist that ultimately come out stronger, but ultimately corrupted. It's all over Glantri. During my travels, I here performed some study of the fiends of Karamaikos. The forests are dark and vast, their histories long and weird. I cannot find enlightenment concerning your nosferatu without first exposing myself to her.'

Von Braden thanked Lord and Lady Antonic for the offer of a guide. 'Can you tell us where in your town we may bed down for the night? We plan to start for the caverns at first light, and I think it'll be best if we get a good night's rest before we embark. If we do meet this Gotha, you can rest assured that we will do our damndest - begging your pardon, My Lady - to kill this creature of the night, and avenge the souls of your dead.'

Lord Antonic nods. 'First eat your fill from this table, then take rest in the Badger's Bollocks, our finest inn. It will cost you nought for you have paid us with your company.'

Fergel leans back, unfastening his belt. He eyes up a massive chunk of giant porcupine meat.

Rooms are provided for the adventurers' comfort at the Badger's Bollocks. The group is forced to share, save Von Braden, whose signet ring affords him solitude - apart from the two serving wenches [known locally as 'Slackthatch' and 'Shagwell'] that he takes up with him after the inn closes for the night.

Verge becomes eerily quiet during the early hours of the morning - it seems an eternity before the night watchmen pass beneath your windows, declaring all is well. A murder of crows tear apart the night with their shrieks, disturbed by some horror shambling through the thick grasses between the sleeping oaks.

The morning creeps back to reassume ascendancy over the day and the adventurers prepare themselves for the twenty-mile trek upland to the Heart Of Halav. Their guide is to be Alucard, a harmless-looking Traladaran male of customary pale skin and dark hair. Alucard appears agitated about the journey and is smoking a forearm-long pipe charged with Hinweed, imported from the Five Shires, to help steady his nerves.

Colum appraises the youth with a mixture of curiosity and disdain for his drug habit. 'Guide - how will you get us to the caves?'

Alucard props himself against a barrel of tar, looking at you through blue mist. 'By boat if you please, Sir. The riverbanks crawl with monsters; we're safer on the water. We go as far as we can then land the boats and make our way by foot. I'll leave you safely by Dead Man's Trail which'll take you directly to the cave mouth.'

Fergel is pleased. 'Sounds good to me; I've no wish to be assaulted by a rampant stoat before the real adventure begins!'

Von Braden relaxes, happy with the events of the past night, though he found little sleep. 'I've heard a little rumour vampires can't cross running water and it seems we may be able to put it to the test.' He scratches his crotch. By the Immortals, my Old Boy is really itching! I hope I've not caught the pox from those feisty wenches. That strangely named 'Shagwell' was a veritable demon between the sheets! Von Braden's fingers stray to his neck and the symbol of the Church of Karamaikos he has placed there. 'I hope the other rumours I've heard are true. I would hate to be accosted by that fiend Gotha or any of her brethren and for this to be useless.'

Ferro stands on the jetty, watching the two wooden boats owned by Alucard float with unease. It is the first time he has travelled over water. Suddenly conscious that his hesitation might be a sign of fear, Ferro raises his voice. 'Avast, you landlubbers! If a dwarf can get aboard these floating crates of timber then so can you.' Ferro climbs aboard. The boat rocks, emitting a malicious creak. Ferro peers over the side, meeting his reflection in the murky waters, the dull glint of reflected light from his helmet dancing in his bulbous eyes.' The only thing water is good for is making ale! If Kagyar hadn't wanted us to live under the stone mountains, He wouldn't have given us axes and picks would he? He made the dwarves in His image; he didn't curse us with gills or fins!'

The morning passes into afternoon and the adventurers cut a determined line through the meandering waters of Foam fire River. 'We're entering the upper course,' Alucard informs the group, panting with exertion. Soon the rapids are too much to overcome and Alucard lands his boat along a pebble beach. Von Braden and Fergel follow in their own boat. 'I'll take you to Dead Man's Trail and no further,' reiterates Alucard. His eyes flick

backwards and forwards all the while, as though expecting some horror to crash out from the trees.

'Lead on, Alucard.' Von Braden follows in the footsteps of the guide. As he sifts through the undergrowth with his keen eyes, he draws one of his twin swords.

Alucard leads the way through light undergrowth too low to cut easily through. The ground rises slowly and the group emerge from the grasses and rotting tree stumps on the side of a hill. It is then they notice the gap between clumps of foliage ahead, winding along the hillside, disappearing into a mesh of pine trees, ever ascending in height. Alucard points towards the gap. 'Dead Man's Trail. I will leave you here. May Halav protect you!' With that, he turns and hurries back to the beach.

Von Braden moves cautiously onwards up the trail, scanning his surroundings for any sign of trouble. Thankfully, the itch in his trousers has diminished to no more than a nagging annoyance, suggesting that it will soon disappear completely.

Something catches Von Braden's eye. He kneels, tracing the contour of a footprint with his fingers. 'Bear spore, crossing the path, heading west. It's less than an hour old.' Von Braden searches the immediate vicinity for further animal tracks but finds none. The trail has been carved by many feet over hundreds of years, but is now partially obscured by yellow grass and conifer.

Ferro nods in agreement. He stoops to study the path intently. He shakes his head before standing straight again. 'Can anybody tell if this path has been travelled recently? If we can find out who has passed by this way we may give ourselves a head start on discovering what lies ahead - and below!' Ferro hefts his axe and forages around in the low scrub for any other clues that may help them on their journey.

Fergel scouts around, sling in hand, careful not to stray too far from the more heavily armed members of the party. He traces the bear's path for short distance. The stink of death assaults his delicate nostrils. The wind carries the fetid aroma down from the hills, the source of the smell unseen but near.

Von Braden's aristocratic nose wrinkles. 'Oh, that's rank. Something lies dead quite close, I presume. 'Let's move on - we don't want to go investigating something unless it's completely necessary. Keep to the path.'

'Wouldn't we be better off knowing what killed whatever it is?' asks Fergel.

'I'm sure if we can find out something to our betterment about the dangers that lie ahead,' answers Colum, sniffing the air, his head slowly turning in tandem with the a breeze carrying the greatest concentration of the stench.

Von Braden holds up his hands. 'Alright, alright. If you want to examine it, fair enough but I protest - it is not a wise plan. There are enough dangers waiting in the depths of those caverns for us to worry about without trudging around in a dark forest seeking out death.'

Ferro pushes through the scrub that lies around the path, searching for the source of the stench that afflicts The human dandy's nostrils. He stomps up the hill and then cautiously surveys the land

beyond from its summit. The hill plateaus for close on seventy feet whereupon a high tree line forms the immediate horizon. Ferro squints, wiping moist particles of dirt from his thickly-lidded eyes.

Close to the pine trees lies the body of a bear, dark of fur and very dead. Its head is nothing more than a glistening red mess. Its side appears to have been savagely split upon, exposing meat-encrusted ribs and a snakelike pyramid of intestine that has slithered out from the wound.

Von Braden follows the dwarf. 'Oh yes, that's just about the most disgusting thing I've ever seen. I particularly like the way its intestines are making that pretty pattern. Something that can rip the head off of a bear is something that we certainly do not wish to tangle with, gentlemen. Especially in territory that is not of our choosing. So, I hate to be a boring old stickler, but can we get the blazes out of here? Or do you want to taste it's blood Colum, to determine the vintage perhaps?'

Fergel catches up with his friends. His face contorts with disgust at the sight of the dead animal. 'What killed it, Ferro? Did you see which way it went?'

'It's just a dead bear,' Ferro replies. 'Whatever killed it is probably long-gone now - though it's funny that whatever beast killed it didn't stop to feed.' Ferro makes his way back down to the path. 'That carcass could have fed half the family for a week back home. Queer animals - or folk - round here that leave uneaten food just lying around for the carrion to feast on.'

Colum leans against his spear. 'Some say life is horrible from end to end and that death is the only escape ... perhaps this creature was the fortunate one?' He ascends to view the bear. He quickly returns, concern etched on his face. 'Footprints. No human made those; here be giants!'

Fergel senses his colleagues' unease and moves swiftly back to the path, casting his gaze about for the terrible creature he is sure will burst from the undergrowth at any moment. He keeps his sling ready in his hand. 'I think we've spent too long outdoors.'

Von Braden continues onwards, one of his swords gripped in his right hand, his other hand not straying too far from the cluster of throwing knives strapped to his chest. His eyes seek out any sign of disturbance on the ground, betraying the passing of other adventurers, or denizens of the caves.

Dead Man's Trail crawls up the hills, finally reaching its end against a peculiar swelling of rocks, tree-root and soil. From a short distance it appears as but another hillock. Now the adventurers have approached more closely, they can learn of the method of its construction. Nature did not carve this construct with water and wind. The intelligence of Man - or some other humanoid - was behind its design. Beneath a large, drooping tongue of dry earth that swings side to side from sticky roots is a black hole, the entrance to a cave. It is tall enough to admit a small dragon, wide enough for a six-strong hunting party.

Well, you great oaf, Von Braden thinks, you wanted adventure and riches so it's time to get your hands dirty! 'I suppose we'd best get some torches lit, Unless of course you can shed some wizardly light on the proceeding, Darken?'

'My spells are for worthy causes only; keep to your burning sticks for navigation.'

Von Braden sighs. 'Two torches then, one near the front, the other to the back. Fergel - you take the rear. Darken, I think I can trust you to lead us?'

Colum swipes a torch from Von Braden's outstretched hand. 'Of course. I want to get this over as fast as you and return to civilisation.'

The group enters the cave, minding the uneven ground. It is not far before their feet begin to struggle against obstacles, hard and sharp. The adventurers crouch, lowering their torches to examine the cave floor. The ground is strewn with bones, rusting weaponry and armour. Skulls gawp up at the transgressors, issuing silent screams from their cracked mouths.

Von Braden is no stranger to the sight of death, is still slightly unnerved by the sight of so many skeletons, but he manages to hide it from his companions, thanking his maker that the cave is too dark for them to see just how much he is perspiring. 'By Karameikos, what kind of beast could have slain this many warriors? I've a sneaky suspicion that it just might be our bear-killing friend from outside.'

Colum holds his torch closer to the skeleton for Von Braden to see better. 'It's a body, like the bear we were investigating in daylight, rather than in darkness by torchlight.' Colum taps his foot impatiently as Von Braden inspects the body.

'I was trying to determine how it became a body, so that we can perhaps avoid joining the poor wretch,' said Von Braden. He carefully nudges skeletons with the tip of his sword. 'They were felled by powerful blows ... their bones are shattered.'

Fergel lifts his torch higher, trying to see past Von Braden and Colum. 'Come on - 'they're long dead. I don't want to get stuck here if the beast that killed the bear comes back'.

Suddenly, the torches seem to flare brighter. The cave has grown darker.

Ferro's eyes widen in shock. 'I can tell you with great certainty that an Athach killed these men!'

The others now see the cave mouth blocked by a towering figure, crouched and hideous. Vaguely resembling the form of Man, its head is bulbous and covered with hair as thick as wire. Deep-set, bloodshot eyes appear to strain to escape from their tight sockets. Beneath a small nose are two tusks that curve upwards like those of the fabled elephants of Sind. They are marbled with blood.

The creature grunts with interest and enters the cave. One of its arms ends in a tree trunk savagely stripped of branches. A third arm, sprouting from the Athach's chest like a tumorous growth.

Chapter 2

Von Braden draws one of his throwing knives, aiming at one of the Athach's eyes. The knife embeds itself into the Athach's left eye. The giant shakes its head, aware that it cannot see properly but unaware of why. It brings its free hand up to scratch at the annoyance. A deep, floor-shaking moan of pain erupts from the creature as it only manages to push the knife further into its leaking eye.

Von Braden draws his swords. Colum backs away from the Athach, holding his spear between him and it. Ferro brings his axe up, readying his attack. 'No time to lose laddies - give the brute a taste of fine steel!'

Fergel feels his legs turn to jelly. He starts to whirl his sling, stumbling to the side to get a clear shot at the Athach's head in order to distract it while the others close in. He tries to shout encouragement to his friends but can only manage a strangled yelp. The sling unfurls its cargo, but Fergel's shaking hand distracts its aim. The stone misses the giant, plinking away into the gloom.

Von Braden moves forward, his twin swords swishing through the air, a web of silver death as he approaches the Athach. 'Get unto the blackguard, Ferro! Back, Hellspawn! Back to the pit that spawned you!' Moving nimbly, Von Braden comes in on the creature's blind-side, slashing at its legs. The blades cut deep into the Athach's legs, their path trailed by spouting blood. The Athach stumbles back, every step a thunder boom. It crouches and regains its balance. It swings its tree trunk club at Von Braden, but the nimble fighter has anticipated the attack and back-pedals. Even so, the back draft from the trunk's passage almost throws him from his feet.

Ferro screams a war cry and cuts with his axe into the Athach's closest leg. The Athach kicks sideways, hurling the dwarf across the cave into the far wall. Ferro collapses, unmoving. The Athach glares at the enemy left standing ... which to attack next? 'The food is fighting!' He shouts. Shadows uncurl from the cave mouth... more of the creatures are approaching!

Von Braden adopts a defensive stance, his back facing the wall. He quickly swings his torch towards the far side of the cave where a smaller opening invites exploration of darker, more sinister depths. Satisfied that he is not going to be attacked from that quarter, Von Braden puts on his best air of confidence and stares the wounded Athach squarely in the face. 'Leave now and call off the rest of your dogs, Beast, and I just might let you live.'

The Athach shakes its misshapen head. 'No leave without food ... hungreee!'

Fergel looks aghast at Ferro's crumpled body, knowing that he needs to make his next shot count or they're all in the pot. He whirls his sling and lets fly a stone towards the Athach, aiming for the creature's undamaged eye. The Athach draws back as the stone smacks its eye.

Colum takes a few steps back to give himself room. He drops his spear and reaches into his bag to pull out a small piece of clear gemstone.

Drawing his curved dagger from its scabbard, Colum cuts himself lightly across his arm. He drags the gemstone across the wound. Raising the bloody gemstone aloft he shouts. 'Aridiculast Vermilon Candescent Orlon!'

A bright light flares in the Athach's eyes. The beast yowls, turns and stumbles away. It collides with the wall beside the opening, then corrects its bearings and flees. It trips over a large tree root and tumbles out of sight. Roars of laughter can be heard coming from beyond the cave mouth. Two more Athachs approach the cave.

Von Braden runs to the cave's rear. 'Over here! Our only chance is the other opening. Darken! If you can keep them occupied for a few moments, I'll get Ferro! Fergel, help me!' He sprints across to the unconscious dwarf, bending to try to rouse him. 'Come on, you malingering oath! Get your broad arse up before that beastie sinks its teeth into it!'

Fergel moves swiftly across to Ferro, stuffing his sling into his pocket as he does so. He grabs hold of Ferro. Helped by the human fighter and grunting with the effort, he begins to drag Ferro towards the smaller cave mouth.

Von Braden snags a hold of Ferro's battle-harness, him across the rocky floor. 'Get up, you gormless horse's ass, or I'll piss in your mouth to wake you!'

Ferro splutters back to consciousness. 'Woough ... Mother ... is that you?'

Von Braden manages a flashing grin at the dwarf. 'If your mother was a devilishly handsome Karameikos studling, then yes, Ferro, it is. *NOW WAKE UP YOU HAIRY BUFFOON! WE NEED YOUR AXE!*'

Ferro cracks open an eye. In a disappointed voice, he speaks. 'You're not my mother - you smell of sweet flowers.' Ferro's head throbs with every resounding footfall of the evil beast that smote him. 'Get my axe!' he shouts. 'You cannot survive the caves' dangers without a fully-armed dwarf!'

Colum swears and retrieves the dwarf's axe. 'We are definitely not coming back this way ...' he snarls, hurrying to keep pace with his comrades as the Athachs' shadows pursue him.

The adventurers enter the second tunnel. The Athachs grunt with frustration at being denied a feast. They push and squirm to squeeze through the opening, but cannot get their huge shoulders through. The group run down the tunnel, at length arriving at a T-junction. At its centre of the junction, the rock wall has been carved into the stylised likeness of a jackal's head, measuring four feet in height. A large, polished stone fills one eye socket, the other is empty and laced with cobwebs. Braziers line the walls of the left and right tunnels, all empty of torches.

Von Braden examines the jackal head. 'What do you make of this, Darken? Though that stone could be valuable, it looks suspicious to me. Smells like a trap, I'd wager. Why is the other eye-socket empty, I wonder?'

Fergel looks up at the jackal as its features shift beneath the torchlight. He studies the sculpture, searching for hidden hinges or unusual holes that may suggest defence mechanisms. 'It is safe; at least

the head itself is. I cannot account for the eyes namely because I cannot reach them!

'This creature is known to me,' Von Braden informs his colleagues. 'The beast it was inspired by, that is. My people - the Traldar - once shared this land with others, men with the heads of jackals. Our legends say they brought prosperity to my kinsfolk, but fled when a great army of gnolls invaded. Some say they remain hidden in these black peaks, unwilling to leave their homes for fear of being attacked again.' Von Braden sniffs the air wafting from the as-yet unexplored corridors. 'Both ways smell equally rank. If you fellows are in agreement, I propose that we go left, for no particular reason other than my left bollock is feeling slightly itchy at this moment. Perhaps it's a mystic sign from the Immortals predicting good-fortune, eh, Darken?'

Fergel nudges Van Braden and indicates he should lift him up. 'Let me take a closer look at the eye before we leave. It would be a shame to leave such a bauble behind.'

'Very well, Little One. I have never understood why the immortals designed Hin with such a short stature ...' Von Braden lifts Fergel up the level of the jackal head's remaining eye.

Fergel Inspects the gem. 'It doesn't appear to be trapped. Gentlemen - shall I remove it so we have something to show for our adventures?'

'Aye Lad,' agrees Ferro, 'it'll pay a king's ransom worth of heavy-duty feasting!'

Fergel scoops the eye from the socket, grinning as the gem glistens in his grasp. 'It is a true beauty ...'

With a silent flash, another gem appears in the socket to take the other's place. Fergel peers intently at the gem in his hand. 'Surely this can't be real?' He weighs the gem, shaking it in his hairy hand. 'If you can just pull gems from this wee hole in the wall then we'll be rich!'

Ferro takes the gem from Fergel. 'Here Lad - let an expert set his gaze on it.' Ferro holds the stone close to his eye, squinting, turning it slowly. 'It's glass, Fergel ... and is that a flash of Specular Hematite I see within?' Ferro passes the stone to Colum. 'Mirrored glass, Wizard. What'd you make of it?'

As soon as Colum takes the stone, an orange light from its centre, bright as a camp fire, illuminates the object. 'A wisp of magic triggers the stone's power,' observes the mage. 'It lights the owner's way. This kind will never burn down. A simple artefact, but invaluable in these caves.'

'Pass me another gem,' requests Fergel, 'it will come in handy if Colum were to misplace his. And who knows, if it works outside the caves, I might pick up a few coins for it when all this is done.' Fergel wraps the gem securely within his jerkin. 'We were going left, weren't we?'

Von Braden attaches his gem to his necklace, tying a spare length of leather around it. 'A pretty piece, to be sure. Just as well we had a nimble-fingered little blighter like yourself with us, Fergel! Alright, take one each and then lets get going.'

Ferro clasps the bounty to his chest with glee and quickly secrets it under his jerkin. Having done that, he takes up position beside Fergel

and follows Van Braden and Colum along the left-bearing tunnel. As the dwarf paces behind the leading pair, he uses his keen eyesight and knowledge of the deep and dark places of the world to inspect the tunnel walls, floor and roof for signs of concealed doors, traps or anything out of the ordinary.

The left tunnel's length is marked by the equidistance between braziers, approximately four metres. The adventurers have so far passed eleven braziers. The floor is paved roughly with stone slabs. They appear to have been dislodged from their original positions and then scattered randomly along the floor. The ground that was once hidden beneath the slabs is covered with pebbles. The group reaches the end of the tunnel and find an archway carved into the rock. The remains of a wooden door cling to one vertical length of the arch, the bronze hinges intact, sharp triangles of wood all that persists. The arch is inscribed with hieroglyphs, the only aspect recognisable to the adventurers are profiles of jackel-headed humanoids. Strange artefacts are carved between the beings, designed for purposes unknown. Beyond the arch is a corridor thirty feet long, featuring braziers along the left wall and a faded tapestry covering the right. At the end of the corridor stands another archway, but this time centred on a completely intact door that is closed.

Von Braden examines the damaged door. 'It appears something burst through there. Either that, or this blasted place is ridden with the nastiest of woodworm! I'll check that out. Ferro, back me up if you will.'

Fergel shivers, wondering what could have broken down the door so easily. He scoops some pebbles from the floor, making sure he has enough ammunition should there be hostile creatures on the other side of the door.

Von Braden moves forward, carefully checking the floor before him as he does so, listening out for any sign of danger from the darkness beyond the doorway. He hesitates, cocking his head. 'Wait. Do you feel it? Air flow ... very weak.'

Ferro hefts his mighty weapon and moves forward. He stays close to the left hand side of the tunnel. He is wary; he has been struck once and is unwilling to be embarrassed in front of the group again quite so easily. 'I do not believe these tunnels are as uninhabited as we first thought. Those beasts back there,' he says, jerking a stubby thumb back along the tunnel from where they had come, 'they need to feed - or be fed by someone keen to keep intruders out.' Ferro notes Von Braden continues to hold his position, head cocked. 'I don't feel anything. Where d'you say the breeze comes from?'

Von Braden nods at the tapestry on the opposite wall. 'About head height - my head height. Look! The tapestry moved just a little.' He raises his sword, swinging it to point at the tapestry. 'Ferro, can your Dwarf eyes give us an edge and make out what caused that movement?'

'It's just a breeze - I hope,' replies Fergel. He moves backward to give himself more space. He readies his sling.

Colum gestures with his spear. 'I could use this to move aside the tapestry, without touching it.'

'Do it. Have your axe ready, Ferro,' says Von Braden.

'A dwarf is always ready for battle!' Replies Ferro.

Colum slides the edge of his spear behind the tapestry. With one, swift move he pushes the tapestry away from the wall. With a clatter of a wooden support yanked from decayed moorings the tapestry falls to the ground, folding upon itself. Dust and frayed cobwebs billow about the cloth.

The adventurers look anxiously at the space once occupied by the tapestry. It appears to be a stone wall covered with brittle clay, just like any other you have encountered in the cave. A good portion of the clay has long since separated from the wall, nothing more than grey powder lost among the pebbles on the floor.

Von Braden slowly starts to relax. 'Looks like a false alarm. Still, it pays to be careful. Would you like to check it out, Fergel?'

Fergel moves cautiously up to the wall and gently explores the stone with his hands. He looks up, trying to determine the source of the breeze that caused the tapestry to stir. 'This wall has been built over an opening. Yes, I can see light shining from the other side! You can rest your bowels Von Braden, it's just wind!' Fergel runs his hands over the stonework, testing its strength. 'Take a look at this Ferro. Do you think we can get through?'

Ferro joins Fergel in investigating the space behind the tapestry, using his years of knowledge gained in the mines to help him. 'This wall was never built to last - or if it was, then the Hutaakans are engineers of the most shameful kind.' Ferro taps at the wall with the blunt edge of his great axe. 'Aye, it's nothing a strong pair of shoulders couldn't breach.'

Von Braden starts forward towards the doorway, keeping an eye on the paving stones on the ground in front. 'Well, my Dwarvish friend, get your axe going, then. Come on, put your back into it! There may be some riches on the other side. Darken and I'll check out that doorway ahead.'

'I'm not going to blunt my axe on stone!' Shouts Ferro. 'Nay, I'll put my back into shifting the false wall - and YOU'RE going to help me, Erik! The Hin is too small and the wizard too slight.' Ferro carefully places his axe on the floor. He motions for Von Braden to assist him. 'Lean into these weak spots here, don't ram them or you'll put your shoulder out of joint. Right - that's good enough - now - *PUSSHHH!*'

The wall resists for a moment, and then suddenly caves in. Light streams in from the exposed area beyond. The tunnel is cylindrical and about the height of a halfling. It curves sharply downwards at approximately thirty feet. The light illuminating the tunnel seems to originate from a source down that curve, out of your sight. Then the adventurers hear the rumbling.

Shot like a cannonball from the curve, a large sphere - nearly five feet in diameter - is propelled into the tunnel. It bounces mightily against the circular walls as it hurtles towards the group!

Up until that moment, the foremost thing in Von Braden's mind had been that his princely clothes had been covered in dust and grime from the collapsing of the wall. Now, however, he realises that he has more pressing matters to contemplate. 'Look out!' He shouts, pushing himself away from the hole and back towards the atrium as the deadly orb speeds towards the group of over-curious adventurers.

The thundering sphere exits the tunnel, ploughing into the opposite wall from where the adventurers watched its approach. Von Braden is the first to move, his highly-trained reflexes easily anticipating the ball's path. The stumpy legs supporting Ferro are not enough to propel the dwarf out of harm's way. Ferro now lies on the floor, crushed against the already broken stone slabs. Fergel has fled past the broken door and now stands panting, far from danger. What of Colum Darken? His cloak is torn and he lies flat on his long face, having tripped over his spear, but he will live another day.

The great ball is stuck firm, wedged into the wall, gripped by splayed stonework. From the tunnel where it emerged noises can now be heard, the sliding, rasping motions of scales against stone. The light that illuminated the coming of the ball now writhes in response to subterranean movements. The noises fade and the light radiating from the hole settles into its former, gently rippling patterns.

Ferro pushes himself up on one arm, mentally checking himself over. His right leg aches deep in the bone - in fact, an ominous protrusion in his woven long johns is his leg-bone. He feels a stabbing pain in his chest, a sure sign of a broken rib or two. Worse still than his physical injuries, Ferro realises that one of his remaining two flagons of Gobflame Ale is smashed. The dwarf lets out a low moan as he watches the dark, malty beer trickle away between the flagstones. 'Goodness Gracious! What a great ball to fire. And something down there,' he continues, pointing a stubby finger down the lit tunnel. 'Sounds it wants to rattle our brains, too. Fergel - can you fashion me a crutch from the remains of that door? As long as I can stand, I'll be able to continue looking after the group.'

Von Braden grabs the dwarf and drags his battered and broken body away from the hole into the atrium. 'Back off!!' he shouts to the others as he goes. 'We've got to get to a more defensible position before whatever scaly bastard is coming out of that hole!!' The swordsman pulls Ferro through the doorway then deposits him to the side of it, drawing one of his swords, his other hand hovering near his chest, giving him the choice of either pulling out his other sword or a throwing knife instead. 'Better ready your wizardry, Mage, because, by Halav, we're going to need it!'

'I'm always ready you oaf.' Colum steps back and prepares to cast a spell. He cups his hands together to create a small, enclosed area within his palms where no light can penetrate. Colum concentrates, breathing out words of power. 'Candescent Negativis!' The mage swings his cupped hands at the tunnel opening. A streak of blackness arcs from Colum's hands towards the hole. The tunnel grows swiftly dark, impenetrable by human sight. The utter darkness hangs around the hole like a low cloud. Nothing can be seen of the tunnel opening, but its contents can still be heard.

The sound of water rushing up through the tunnel opening is sudden and deafening. A wall of water appears, blasting through Colum's spell and crashing against the tunnel walls. The water splits into three separate masses, each assuming a vaguely humanoid form. The entities gurgle like some huge mouthwash, their appendages scraping the tunnel walls with the noise of rushing water coruscating over river beds. The

water elementals rear up before descending like a tidal wave. They attack! The adventurers slash and thrust at the creatures, but their weapons pass harmlessly through them, cleaving through thin air.

Fergel looks around to try to find a suitable piece of wood to act as a crutch for Ferro. On locating one, Fergel tosses it to the disabled dwarf. 'You'll have to help yourself for now!' Fergel ducks out of the way of the onrushing elementals. He fires off a stone but looks on in dismay as it passes through his target and rebounds off the passage wall beyond.

Von Braden draws his other sword as soon as he sees the rushing activity at the tunnel mouth. He instinctively slashes both at the water elementals. 'By Halav, I'm as well pulling my Old Boy out and pissing into them! There's no way we can damage these infernal beings!' As the water splashes down, soaking his garments through, Von Braden turns and bellows at Colum Darken. 'More magic is in order, I believe!' Feeling somewhat impotent under the current circumstances, Von Braden utters a silent prayer to himself. *Be with me, my Father ... be with us all ...*

Ferro studies the water elementals with awe. To a dwarf, water is a powerful ally and a terrible danger, but there was no reason to fear these spirits, for how could they harm a living creature? Gentlemen, what harm have these spirits caused to us? They cannot harm us! I say we leave be. We'll face worse obstacles than these nymphs as we go deeper.'

The water elemental attacked by Von Braden reforms and lashes out at the fighter. To Von Braden, the blow is like one felt from an impact with a stone wall. Von Braden spits blood as he reels and falls back against the ball lodged against the corridor wall. He drops one of his swords. The elemental coalesces about Von Braden's head - slowly drowning him!

The other two elementals train their hostility on Ferro and Fergel. Ferro hold his breath as a sphere of water forms around his head, its wet tendrils fighting to swim up his nostrils and to part his lips. Fergel covers up his face with his heavy cloak to shut out the frightening image of the approaching elemental. His cloak swiftly becomes water-logged.

Ferro resolves not to panic, even though a globe of water surrounds his head. He waves one hand in front of his face vigorously, hoping to disperse the elemental. With his other hand, he withdraws the candlestone and brandishes it at arms length in front of him, hoping the jewel may have some effect. However, the candlestone's magic has no effect on the elemental's attack, and any attempt made to wipe the creature from the adventurers' faces meet with failure. Every time you succeed in splashing an amount of water away, it loops back, reforming with the rest of the mass.

Feeling his heavy, wet cloak constricting about his face, Fergel starts to panic. He tears at the cloth, trying to get it clear of his face. As he does so, the air explodes from his lungs. The elemental sends writhing tubes of water up the halfling's nostrils and down his nose. Fergel begins to drown!

Von Braden chokes up water, trying to force it out like the unwanted invader it is. His hands go to the artefacts on his neck, the symbol of his faith and the candle stone. He grasps them in his hands, closes his eyes and starts to pray. Halav, if you have ever been with me,

be with me now. Be my guide in time of need; be my comforter in times of woe; and be my strength to fight off the denizens of the darkness!

Colum watches with a strange mixture of interest and pity as his comrades slowly die. *The fools - do they know nothing about the nature of elementals? Look how the dwarf slaps pathetically at the entity as his life force slips away!* Colum reaches for his spellbook, then hesitates. Should he let one of the sufferers perish, as a lesson to the others? Colum makes his decision. He draws his spellbook and casts. 'Boosh Velocitas!' A glowing arrow materialises beside the mage, then flies through the air with the sound of a thunderclap towards Ferro. The arrow strikes the water elemental. The creature withdraws from the dwarf's face, glaring at Colum with flickering green eyes. 'Elementals cannot survive without a link to their native plane,' Colum speaks. 'We have to seek out their point of origin and destroy it!' Colum gesticulates towards the black pall obfuscating the far tunnel, a cloud of his own creation. 'Look how their bodies extend from the tunnel - seal the tunnel and the elementals will fail!' Colum launches two further magic missiles.

The elementals attacking Von Braden and Fergel retreat - but only for a moment. They rear up like tidal waves and prepare to come blasting down in attack. Von Braden falls forward, choking and spluttering. He is thankful for the temporary respite from the elemental's assault. *Destroy the tunnel, Darken? How do I do that? Shoot a thunderbolt from my arse perhaps?* These thoughts hiss sarcastically in Von Braden's mind, though he truthfully acknowledges he owes the mage his life - and this annoys him. Von Braden reaches out and grabs his swords from where they have fallen, then turns to check on Fergel and Ferro.

Ferro is all but spent, his earlier wounds combined with his near-drowning to render him close to unconsciousness. Still, he grumbles beneath his breath, no doubt issuing a tirade of Dwarvish curses. Fergel struggles to rise from his knees, weighed down by his waterlogged cloak.

Von Braden shouts at Colum: 'Send a magic missile up their watery arses, Darken, and I'll owe you a night's beverage at next tavern we reach!'

Colum wheezes from the exertion of casting so many spells in such a short time. 'I cannot sustain this spell for much longer - it drains my life energies! You have to enter the tunnel and destroy the elemental's source or they'll drown us all!'

Fergel struggles to his feet and pulls the wet cloak from around his shoulders, making sure that he retrieves the silver clasp. He tucks it safely away in his purse. The fear and helplessness he once felt starts to give way to anger. 'Come on Ferro, get to your feet! We need to pull down that tunnel and you're the dwarf who knows how!'

With a groan, Ferro pushes himself up. 'Our best bet would be to plug the tunnel with that giant ball of rock that nearly flattened me. If we could then seal it somehow.' Ferro divides his fevered attention between the ball lodged against the wall and the undulating water elementals. 'I cannot lift it; not with my leg and ribs crushed as they are. Who is the strongest amongst us? Someone has the chance to prove themselves a true hero and save us all!'

Von Braden starts forward with Fergel, heading towards the tunnel. 'Darken - try and keep those watery bastards off my back for as long as you can!', motioning to Fergel as he goes. 'I could do with your help, my friend!!'

Colum throws Ferro his spear. 'This will serve as a crutch well enough.' Colum concentrates, channelling his life energies once more. 'Boosh Velocitas!' He clutches his chest as another sliver of his vital energies part from his weakened body. The magic missile strikes the water elemental closest to Von Braden. The entity rears backwards, flattening and expanding its form in an effort to escape the missile's effect. The elemental's transparent, ever-moving form glows like fire against thickened glass as the missile finds a home.

Von Braden sprints down the tunnel and leap into the hole at its end. He passes through the fading black cloud of Colum's doing and falls through open air.

Fergel gulps as he watches his friend disappear into zone of darkness. As a Hin, he is initially sceptical of all things magical, but now his mind has been awakened to its amazing potential. Still, he hesitates before following Von Braden into the hole ... until the water elementals make chase. Fergel closes his eyes and screams as he leaps into the darkness. 'Halfling in the hole!'

Both man and Hin land in a pool of water. Spluttering to clear the fluid from throats and nostrils, they rise to full height, Fergel's head barely clearing the water's surface. The pool occupies approximately a third of the floor space of a low-ceilinged chamber. The water appears to be entirely contained within the pool, with no circulation. Its surface is covered with dirt freshly collapsed from the tunnel sides, disturbed by the duo's intrusion.

To one side of the pool is an embankment, a foot higher than the water level. The ledge runs twelve-feet deep, whereupon it meets with a large, rusting contraption built from stone, metal and wood. From a metal cylinder extending from the device a beam of energy flickers. It terminates in the pool. Close to the beam and pools' point of intersection are three miniature water spouts rising and swirling above the adventurers' heads.

In the tunnel above, Ferro watches as the water elementals turn their attentions back to the hole they originated from. 'May the Immortals be with you,' he mutters in support of Von Braden and Fergel. 'Beware, my fellow adventurers! Ferro rises, supporting his leg with Colum's spear. He casts a wary eye around the tunnel, looking out and listening for any further signs of danger.

Colum collapses against the ball, his life force nearly spent. A relatively minor wizard, he can as yet only draw the potential to cast spells from his own spirit, unlike his father who can draw forth the energies of the cosmos as easily as one may charge a quill with ink.

'Fergel hauls himself out of the pool and starts belting the cylinder in an attempt to break the link between the glowing beam and the water's

surface. 'We must break the beam, Erik! Can you bend the cylinder so that it angles away from the water?'

Von Braden heads for the embankment as quickly as he can, and pulling himself up onto it. 'Methinks we have to destroy that tube, Fergel, and quickly!'

'I just suggested that! You longshanks never listen to anything spoken beneath the level of your codpieces ...'

Von Braden searches the strange apparatus for signs of structural weakness. 'This thing discharges a magic beam of light, but how and from where? The spout is only the end of the process. What if I knock the spout out of alignment - will it make a difference?'

'It will if it saves our lives; do something!'

Von Braden brings sword down hard on the spout. The sword rattles against the spout's metal construction but the spout remains intact. The three water spouts begin to thicken in diameter, swelling as their owners ripple back down the hole, descending from the upper tunnel to the pool-room.

Fergel uses his pry bar, holding it with both his stubby hands for a firm grip, to try to damage the machine. The spout refuses to comply with Fergel's frantic assault by breaking.

The elementals are once more upon the adventurers! One of the creatures grabs Fergel, dragging him into the pool with it. Both halfling and elemental dive beneath the surface.

Von Braden retreats, ducking behind part of the machine while he considers his tactics. The two remaining elementals circle the apparatus, readying their final attack.

Fergel watches through dirt-scratched eyes as the waters close over him. He knows he will be drowned unless he acts quickly. Pushing with all his might against the bottom of pool, Fergel reaches for the beam of light. He tries to cover the end of the cylinder with the palm of his hand. Fergel's first attempt to reach the beam is thwarted by a savage blow from the water elemental. He loses his lungs' worth of air and takes in as much water, coughing in choking, muted, bubbling tones beneath the water's surface. Fergel makes one final attempt to claim the spout before darkness can dominate his vision. He clamps one of his shaking hands around the cylinder's edge. The steady beam of light fractures, splitting into numerous, smaller rays, escaping through the cracks between Fergel's fingers. Instantly he can feel the elemental's grip weakening, then it fades to nothing, as though it never existed.

Von Braden's eye widen with hope as the other two water elementals begin to lose cohesion. Like two great buckets of water upturned by a careless washerwomen, both creatures plummet to the cavern's floor, spilling in all directions.

Ferro limps over to the hole in the wall and calls down. 'I cannot hear any screams; is it safe to assume you've beaten these elementals?'

Colum sits with his back against a wall. 'Dwarf, if they hadn't managed to switch off the link we'd be dead by now. Your axe and my

magic had no real affect on the elementals. I can only assume that 'Von Braggart' got lucky. Give me a couple of moments and Ill be able to get up.' Colum curses his luck; magic was a burden as much as it was a boon. *If only it was not so addictive ...*

Von Braden is reunited with Darken and Ferro. He feasts on some of his provisions to regain his strength.

Fergel drags himself back up to the corridor to find Ferro and Colum waiting. He kneels down next to Ferro. 'Are you able to move? We can find you a crutch, but I think we need to put a splint on your leg or you'll pass out every time you try to walk.' Fergel searches the corridor for some suitable pieces of wood. He breaks off a splinter of wood from the shattered door and returns to his patient. Fergel tears strips of cloth from his cloak to help bind the splint to the injured dwarf's leg.

The wooden door nearby groans, a sound that pushes its way through the gaps between its heavy timbers. A ghostly head appears before the group, that of a beast man, more jackal than human. The flickering spectre glows in stark contrast, its lightly-furred flesh shimmering, its eyes and mouth lost in darkness. It speaks. 'Announce your intentions, you who have transgressed in the temple of Pflarr.'

Von Braden thinks fast, staring directly at the ghostly apparition. 'We came to these mountains in search of adventure, and then were chased into these caves by savage creatures ... Athachs, who wanted to feast on our flesh! Our humblest apologies if we have caused the desecration that you speak off. The dead are to be honoured, not defiled.'

The ghostly Hutaakan is silent for a long moment. 'There is truth in your words, Traladaran.' We are a peaceful people and will not bar your way unless you spill blood within the temple. Go where you will.' The spectral head disappears from sight.

'Well, what do you think of that?' asks Von Braden of his companions. 'Whereas I meant what I said, and don't fancy defiling a resting place of the dead, we still have to find this vampire-bitch Gotha who's been holding Verge in the grip of fear. So, I vote we go on, if only to slay this foul creature and present its head to the Lord and Lady Antonic on a spike! if we find some pretty baubles along the way, all the better ...' Von Braden pauses, looking back to where the spirit had appeared, '... but not from any tombs or graves of your mighty people, you understand.'

'We've come this far, we cannot turn back now!' states Ferro. 'We will honour the dead, but life - and all its riches - belongs to the living! Let us not dally here longer. Let us continue.'

'You shame us all, Ferro,' replies Von Braden. 'I am with you. Perhaps we should call you 'Ferro of the stout-heart' from now on, eh?'

Colum sneers. 'Maybe it's because he's as lumpen-headed as you are arrogant and brash; I'm sure it's a dwarf trait. Still, its catching because I'm with you.' Colum smiles wryly and follows the other two using his spear as a walking stick.' I am still weakened from my exertions. I need more rest - I recommend we all get some.'

Von Braden agrees. 'I recommend we eat some provisions and then get going once you feel stronger. However, Fergel, can you look at that door? It may be better to make sure it is open, so that when we do wish to proceed, we can without hindrance.'

Fergel examines the door. 'Perhaps we should call you Erik of the Brown Tongue'. The door is as ghostly as the Hutaakan's head. Though it looks solid, any attempt to touch it meets with thin air. Any adventurer who tries to walk through it emerges slightly further down the same corridor, exactly where they would be if they had opened a real door and completed a single stride through. The corridor continues for another fifty feet and then joins a set of stone stairs which descend about thirty feet before meeting a landing. Another set of stairs continues downwards out of sight at a right angle.

His newly acquisitioned gemstone lighting the way, and as quiet as a cat, Von Braden leads the group down the steps, both of his swords drawn in case of attack. The stairs exit at the edge of a low-ceilinged hall, its roof supported by thick, stone columns that stand in two rows, fading into the unlit depths of the hall. The columns are bedecked in hieroglyphics depicting the Hutaakans.

Von Braden studies the hall. 'We should make camp here so that Darken can rest and you others get some food in your bellies.' Von Braden takes up a vantage position against a nearby wall, allowing him a vantage point where can watch both the stairs and the visible portion of the hall.

Fergel removes his wet cloak, searching for somewhere to hang it to dry. He pulls a rough woollen blanket from his pack and wraps it around himself before starting on his provisions. 'It's a shame we could not have a fire, but it would only draw attention to ourselves. Ah well!' He burrows further into his blanket. 'Erik, if you're going to take first watch, wake me in a couple of hours. Ferro and Colum need their rest more than me.'

Ferro rests upon the ground. 'This temple has thrown up more than it's fair share of surprises already, and I don't want to face more on an empty stomach!' With that, Ferro takes out a portion of his provisions and settles down to eat. To wash the snack down, he drinks a smattering of his treasured Gobflame Ale.

As Ferro finishes his snack, he turns his gaze around the large hall. His Dwarvish eyesight cuts through the gloom, allowing him to see deeper into the dark recesses of the room than the rest of his fellow band of adventurers. Amongst the pillars and columns, Ferro catches the faintest of sights. Sure that he has seen movement, Ferro peers harder. After a few moments of squinting, he spots several creatures - a half-dozen at his first count - approaching.

Silently, Ferro rouses the dozing members of the group. 'Beware! I fear we are once more being watched - and by fell-monsters the like of which should not be seen beyond of the Outer Planes! These creatures are the Dark Naga! Their very name casts fear into even my stoutest of hearts. They are serpentine in form, save their heads, which resemble the grotesquely disfigured heads of men - worse even than yours, Von Braden! Make ready, for they are closing fast.'

Von Braden brandishes both his swords, assuming a combat crouch, his back to the wall. 'Now, these beasts I can slay!' 'Let's wet our blades in Snakeman blood!'

Fergel carefully sheds his blanket and crawls behind one of the pillars. Once there, he stands and readies his sling whilst carefully looking around the pillar for a suitable target.

From the depths of the chamber, the Dark Naga slither into view; a half-dozen of them, horribly serpentine creatures, their hypnotic eyes blazing out at the quartet of adventurers.

Fergel suddenly feels intensely tired. He looks down at his blanket lying on the floor and thinks of how warm and comfortable it felt when wrapped around him. He can feel the sling in his hand and a voice inside him is shouting for attention, telling him he is in danger, but the voice recedes as the need for sleep grows ...

Ferro's eyes grow heavy, but the dwarf is strong of mind and tries hard to resist the Dark Nagas' soporific blanket. He knows that these creatures are dangerous; in addition to their sharply-barbed tails, they also have the ability to use magic to conquer their foes. In the muddy haze of his mind, Ferro decides that he isn't going to be the next of their victims. He also realises that he is not mobile enough to lead an attack on the Naga, so he stands resolute, axe in hand. All the while, Ferro concentrates hard, trying to keep his mind from slipping under the enemy's influence.

Von Braden shakes his head, trying to clear his swimming, lethargic mind. 'They're trying to put a hex on us! Fight it, damn you!! Don't give in!'

Moving as fast as his tired limbs can move, the mercenary then sheaths one of his swords and grabs one of his throwing knives, sizing up his opponents as he does so. Then, in a blur, he throws the blade at the eyes of the creature he takes to be the leader of the dark-hearted beasts. The knife strikes the Dark Naga in the throat, and it sends out a roar of agony, clawing at the weapon, as its companions close in on the hapless mercenary. Von Braden throws another knife, but does no damage due to the armoured hide of his target.

Ferro throws one of his axes, but the weapon merely glances off the skin of the nearest creature. One of the other Naga hisses words reeking of magic. Seconds later, Ferro is thrown off of his feet by an invisible force. He smashes against the wall with a grunt of pain, before falling to the floor.

The Dark Naga return their collective attention back to Von Braden. The closest serpent lashes at the mercenary with its stinger-tail. Von Braden dodges nimbly to the side, slashing out with one of his swords as he goes by, opening up the creature's abdomen in a gory blur. The Naga gives a surprised cry, then collapses to the floor. Von Braden barely has time to recover before the second Naga slithers in, eyes blazing with rage. Von Braden parries the attack, desperately trying to defend himself from the four remaining beasts.

Ferro issues a pained groan and gets to his feet, reaching for his second throwing axe. 'Just hold on, Lad!'

Von Braden slashes out again, and another of the Naga goes down, its gargoylesque features now a torn, crimson ruin. The fourth Naga moves in on Von Braden's exposed side, preparing to unleash a killing blow. It recoils as Ferro's throwing axe bites deep into its neck. With a strangled cry, the Naga collapses in a pool of its own body fluids, beginning the long, inevitable process of dying.

Von Braden takes advantage of the distraction caused by Ferro's attack. He flies in to attack again, his swords a blurring web of death, killing one of his opponents and badly injuring another. Von Braden swivels quickly to face off with last, uninjured Naga. The beast avoids Von Braden's killing blow and bears down on him with its gaping jaws, ripping a huge chunk of flesh from his left arm. Von Braden drops his left-hand sword and bellows in defiance. He plunges in with his right sword, sinking the blade deep into the Naga's dark heart. With a gurgling hiss, the creature drops to the floor like a stone. Von Braden removes his blade, his expression one of adrenaline-induced triumph. 'Take that, you scaly Twat!'

Ferro finishes off the stricken Naga with his mighty axe, doing his best to keep his battered body from succumbing to his wounds. For now, at least, the battle is over.

Von Braden allows himself a breath. As the pain in his arm finally begins to consume him, the outrageous mercenary manages one of his most confident grins and turns to Ferro. 'Where are the recorders of such feats when you need them?' He finally relaxes, collapsing backwards against the nearest wall, his single sword still upthrust in defiance.

Fergel yawns, stretches and scratches his groin. Should I have a ... no, I'll save that 'til later. He opens his eyes, staring at the ceiling above and trying to remember where he is. The scent of fresh blood assaults his nostrils and he sits up sharply. He looks over towards Von Braden and Ferro, who pant from their exertions. 'What the hell's been going on here, then?'

Colum awakens, his nostrils filled with the smell of alien blood. 'Urgh ... What did I drink last night?'

Ferro reclaims his throwing axes, sets them about his waist then leans on his great axe. 'We should be cautious! These beasts will not have travelled alone; they are leaders of foul armies. Let us continue, but be aware for their kinsmen. If you are ready, then let us make haste. We still have work to do before we can claim the riches these vaults will surely yield!'

The Dark Naga perish, one by one. Their bodies writhe in death throes. The creatures reflexively vomit up the contents of their first stomachs - clothing, jewellery, weapons and coins.

Von Braden curses. 'Can't these snake-hides have the decency to die with some dignity? Still, those little baubles look interesting...'

Fergel moves across to Von Braden and examines the wound in his arm. 'It will need to be bound, and possibly stitched as well. Does anyone have a needle and some catgut?' Fergel instructs Von Braden to sit down and hold the wound tightly in his hand. Fergel tears a strip of cloth from his undershirt and binds the human's wound.

Colum smiles. 'I think we've just gained the fruits of our labour. We should quickly work out what we want to take. I can cast a spell that should help us.' Without waiting for an answer, Colum rummages in his bag and pulls out a glass lens. 'Distinguishus sorcerum.'

Ferro cautiously kicks at the horde of gold, jewels and trinkets gently with his one good foot, trying to discern whether they are real or another foul apparition. He stoops to take a couple of gold pieces, testing them for weight and feel in his hand. He then bites at a gold coin. 'The real thing!' Ferro brings his axe down and splits the Naga's body asunder, in the hope of revealing more bounty.

Von Braden's eyes light up as he sees the revealed treasures. 'Why, this makes this wound of mine bearable indeed! Let's fill our packs with as much as we can carry, and divide it up later.'

Fergel holds his cloak over his face to fend off the stench smoking out from the bubbling contents of the Dark Naga's stomachs. He stirs the pile of loot with the tip of his short sword, looking to see if there is anything useful within.

Colum laughs loudly, winking at Von Braden. 'According to my spell, only the potions and the scrolls are magical. I reckon the silver dagger may help against evil creatures. The mace and the buckler don't have a magical trace, but may be of superior make.'

Fergel uses the tip of his sword to examine the stones, trying to determine their origin, as well as trying to assess whether they would make good ammunition for his sling. 'All shapes and sizes; all kinds of good uses!'

Ferro stores around thirty gold pieces, ten silver pieces and thirty electrum pieces in his pack, then turns his attention to the potion of healing. 'If no-one else objects, I'll have this!'

Von Braden retrieves his thrown daggers from the Naga. 'The rest of you can split up those other weapons if you like. Von Braden helps himself to some of the coins spilt from the Dark Naga's bellies, as well as the magical scroll identified by Darken as a 'scroll of mapping. Ferro - lend me your stone again, would you?' Searching the hall, Von Braden discovers a hole in the floor, covered by a heavy, iron grating. Shining the candlestone's light down into the hole reveals a flight of stairs that descend out of sight. 'It appears as though I've found a possible way out of this place.'

Chapter 3

The group enter the tunnel beneath the iron grate and carefully descend the staircase. It leads onto a short corridor barred at one end by a wooden door decorated more ornately than any thus far encountered.

Another ghostly Hutaakan head appears. 'Speak the words of authority and you shall pass.'

Von Braden raises an eyebrow, quite perplexed. 'Over to you, Darken?'

Darken steps forwards. 'Von Braggart, the 'words of authority' is an antiquated way of asking for a password, translated from a mode of etiquette created by the ancient Nithians. I believe you are somehow miraculously descended from that noble lot. How the mighty have fallen, eh? I suppose we need to find a clue as to what the password is, lest we set off a hidden trap.'

Von Braden shrugs. 'How about "Open, please?" Ferro, Fergel - any ideas?'

The Hutaakan spectre flickers. 'Those are not the words of authority. You have two more attempts before the Priests are alerted to your failure.'

Ferro examines the door. 'In the cities of my people, doors such as these all have other means of opening, if not by key or spell then by hidden measures. Hmmm, I have yet to find the device for this blasted door!' Ferro pulls a flagon from his belt. 'Perhaps a drop of the good stuff will loosen the brain-cords,' he mutters as he takes a long pull from the vessel.

Von Braden takes a step back. 'I'd better not say anything else, unless I end up bringing these priest fellows down on us. Darken, do you know the Nithian for 'Password?'

'Unfortunately I don't Von Braden, but it can't be that difficult. We must be missing something, exactly what I'm not sure of. What were the exact words of that apparition again?'

Von Braden curses: 'By Halav, Petra and Zirchev, your memory is as poor as a street beggar. "Speak the words of authority and you shall pass." That's what the ghost said ... I think!' Von Braden closes his eyes, concentrating. He speaks, raising his voice for all to hear. 'The Words of Authority ...'

The disembodied head moves slowly from side to side. 'Those are not the words of authority. You have one more opportunity to speak them correctly before the Priests are summoned to attend to you.'

Fergel tightens his grip on his buckler and makes sure he has a nice, sharp stone ready in his sling, just in case. 'Come on you learned types, it's down to you now. I've spend the last two years in a whorehouse. The only Nithian I know is 'Oh, it's so huge!' and 'Aaagh! I think you need a bit more oil!'

Von Braden puts on his most lordly gait and walks forward, approaching the ghostly apparition. 'I am Lord Erik Von Braden-'

Darken shakes his head. 'Von Braggart, since you've used up two of our guesses, I'm going to go with "Praise be to Pflarr," ' whispers Colum. 'We had better prepare for a fight.'

The Hutaakan head disappears, its booming voice all that remains. 'You have transgressed. The Priests of Temple Law are alerted to your presence. Do not resist them ...' The corridor is silent and menacingly dark where the enchanted radiance of your candlestones cannot reach.

Ferro's eyes are wide with dreaded anticipation. A dweller of the depths, the dwarf's enhanced senses again bring notice of danger to the group. 'Wait! Do you not hear it? Stone against stone ... and now the crawl of flesh and garment!'

The adventurers' candlestones continue to pulse, sending out wide fingers of creamy light against the walls and floor. The light's tapered edges begin to reform in more complicated patterns as they paint themselves over the new arrivals: jackal-headed humanoids of desiccated flesh, clad in long robes of blue and gold that part with each, uncertain step to reveal legs of exposed, yellow bone. Their extended, bestial skulls are empty of eyeball and fur and what skin remains clings precariously against their perches, or flaps madly in the slight breeze. Leaning on ornate staffs tipped with glowing crystals, a booming number of the undead Priests of Law drag themselves towards the intruders!

Von Braden stares at the multitude in awe. 'Priests? What type of bloody priest is this? Will this bull-dung never end? Although it ails me to say it, I don't think we've got a chance against this lot! Not in the condition we're in, and there's simply too many of them! But if you jolly-fellows want to go out fighting, then, by Halav, I'm with you!'

Fergel curses under his breath, backing down the corridor, away from the priests. He whirls a stone in his sling, ready to fire. 'Colum: burn them back to the hell where they came from!' Fergel lets his sling stone fly, aiming for the exposed leg bones of the lead priest.

Von Braden sighs. 'Ah, well, here we go again!' He pulls out one of his swords with his good hand and brandishes it before him.

Colum extends his arms to usher his companions behind him. 'Get back! Let me take us to our first victory. 'Boosh Velocitas!' The mage casts one magic missile after another at the closest priest. The glowing, mystical arrows blow holes into the undead entity's withered bones. The Priest loses its balance and falls backwards, shattering, a scattered mess of appendages and a chattering bone jaw. Colum feels his strength diminish. Drained by repeated casting of the spell. He leans heavily into his spear for support. 'I ... have done my part.'

Fergel lets fly three heavy stones, salvaged from a Dark Naga's stomach. Two hit their mark, knocking a Priest's head from its shoulders. The remaining body totters forwards, moving uncertainly. It changes direction and walks into its colleague. The other Priest knocks the headless one to the floor and continues advancing on the group.

Von Braden cut a figure eight pattern before him with his swords, slicing up and down in quick strokes. The Priests circle about Von Braden, evading his brutal sword slashes. They close in until they are inches beyond the swords' pointed tips. One by one, the Priests push their gem-topped staffs towards the group, a defence against sword or axe

blows. The Priests fixate on their enemies with eyeless sockets, their extended jaws working silently, fangs grinding against fangs.

Fergel loads his sling and fires another stone at the nearest Priest. 'Their clothes are old and should burn easily! Colum, can you produce some fire to get them going?'

'Fool of a halfling! I don't have enough energy left to light a fart from Backhelm's flabby arse! I have helped you all I can ... now defend me!'

The Priests raise their staffs as one. The gems seated on their tips begin to pulsate softly, then quickly flare out with a sharp intensity that blinds the adventurers ...

Scant, hazy waves of light begin to intrude on the bliss of sleep that has somehow overcome the adventurers. Sound gently follows, though what it brings does little to illuminate their latest predicament. One by one the adventurers are kicked back into full consciousness by the feet of unseen assailants. Eventually, enough of their senses return for them to comprehend what has happened to them, and where they now reside, on the hard, stone floor of a chamber whose walls are coated with more of the Hutaakan hieroglyphics. The adventurers' weapons and equipment remain on their persons. Behind them stand the Priests Of Law. Beyond and surrounding are wooden chests overflowing with treasures undreamt of!

All sit within a cocoon of tapestries depicting the history of beings far older than the adventurers. Before them, sat on a golden throne, is their worst nightmare: a human woman, her skin as white as chalk, her hair rushing from her scalp in a torrent of blood red that fades to ice-white as its tendrils curve down her arms and over her glistening, exposed breasts. Her wrists and ankles are encased in black jewellery, her long, clawlike fingers and toes tipped with ebony knives. This is Gotha ... Nosferatu! 'How convenient that you arrived when you did,' the vampire purrs. 'I am growing very thirsty. I blame it on the dust.'

Colum smiles broadly at the nosferatu. 'You must be Gotha; the reports of your terrible beauty have not been exaggerated. You are possibly the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and my mother was a succubus.' If I may be so bold? I'd eat one of the little ones first and save that big one for later - he looks to be a good meal. With honesty, I'd like to kill him for you; he has been getting on my nerves since I met him. Hiding my demonic heritage from this lot has not been easy. It is in my blood, so to speak, to betray them.'

Von Braden is not certain whether the mage is bluffing or actually telling the truth. He decides to play along, opting to decide later whether to slit his gizzards open. 'You traitorous bastard, Mage! I should have known!'

Colum laughs cruelly. 'You're a phoney, you and your magical jockstrap; I bet it's to enhance your manhood. Are you really that insecure? I'm sure one of these Priests will have it as a snack later.'

Colum addresses Gotha. 'I could kill him very slowly; he would keep you in blood for weeks. The little ones will keep you ticking over, though the halfling might be contagious.'

'You demonic scum!' shouts Fergel. He circles away from Colum, whirling his sling up to full speed. Two of the Priests creak into action. They interpose themselves between Fergel and Colum.

Von Braden tries not to show his fear, seeking to avoid Gotha's powerful gaze. He feels for his article of faith, the symbol of his beliefs. He fingers his silver dagger, the bane of the undead, of shadow-dwellers ...

Ferro blocks Von Braden's aim with an outstretched axe. 'Gotha is our leader! Respect her, or you'll be feeling the bite of my axe in your skull!'

Gotha eyes Colum. 'Stay your place, Mage.' She raises her hand, flexing her fingers in the direction of Ferro. 'Disarm him.'

Von Braden knows Ferro has fallen under Gotha's power; he has but a moment in which to act before they are all doomed. Von Braden moves his finger from the hilt of the dagger, slowly drawing one of his swords. He nods as he passes it to Ferro, his face twisted in anguish, 'Here! Take it! Do with me what you will! Colum is right - I am a fraud, an ignoble limp-wrist! I'm surprised I even lasted this long ... here, take it!'

Ferro takes the sword with a relieved grin. 'You're seeing sense at last. The Mistress knows what is best for us all.'

As his hand moves in a gesture to remove his other, cross-bladed sword, Von Braden, summoning every ounce of his considerable combat prowess, grabs instead the hilt of the silver-blade, pulls it from the bandolier and throws it with all his might at Gotha's terrible visage, aiming directly between her eyes! The silver dagger streaks like moonlight across the void between mercenary and nosferatu ... to be caught in Gotha's grip! Ruby red ichor oozes between the nosferatu witch's thin, bony fingers, splattering on the stone floor. Gotha's eyes open to their fullest, revealing ebony orbs like miniature black holes, devoid of reflection. 'SSHHHHHH!' she hisses.

Von Braden unsheathes his remaining sword and launches at Gotha, executing a sweep that would sever the arm of a lesser being.

Ferro gasps at the human's audacity. He draws his axe-hand back to bring down a blow that will slay his former colleague.

Von Braden strikes at Gotha with all his strength. He cuts deep into her outstretched arm. His blade exits through the other side of the appendage and the nosferatu's disembodied forearm drops to the floor, spraying blood behind it.

The nosferatu's primeval core, a malevolent storm of uttermost darkness, now dominates her instincts. She lurches out of her seat to strike a fatal blow to Von Braden. As she prepares to kill, something causes Gotha to draw back, a surprised expression of fear now framing her features. Gotha's gloriously beautiful, macabre white body shimmers and loses substance. A billowing grey mist now takes her place. It rises, seeping through cracks in the chamber's roof, until not a wisp remains.

Ferro is confused by the turn of events, but now gathers his wits. 'Bah! Your victory means nothing in the long term! The Mistress will

return, and I'll have a nice present for her - your head on a platter!' Ferro attacks Von Braden, his axe cutting through the dusty air.

Von Braden nimbly dodges the initial thrust of Ferro's axe, bringing up his own sword to parry a further, follow up blow, all the while looking into the dwarf's eyes. 'Ferro, my stout-hearted ally! This is not the way - we are not enemies!'

Colum steps closer to Ferro. 'Stop Ferro. Gotha is gone now. There's nothing to compel you to follow her. Nothing. Stop my friend, stem your anger!'

Fergel joins Colum's attempt to free Ferro, 'Snap out of it! The vampire bitch has gone!' Fergel circles the warring duo, spinning his sling, ready to drive a very painful and distracting blow to Ferro's groin if he doesn't cease his attack.

Ferro hesitates just as another axe blow is about to descend on Von Braden. 'Eh? We would not be here if it weren't for the Mistress, for Gotha ... our leader ...' Ferro stares at Von Braden, then his eyes widen at Fergel, and the sling ready to lurch a large stone into the dwarf's knackers. Ferro points at the halfling in anger. 'Gotha has never tried to hurt me, but this little runt is keen on ending my wenching days!'

Von Braden takes a step away from Ferro, his sword erect in defence. 'Come, my friend. We have been through too much together! Surely you can see that we are your faithful companions, not that creature of the dark! Fight her black-hearted will!' Von Braden swipes Colum with a glance. 'Can't you 'un-hex' him, or something?'

'I have tried,' Colum replies, 'but the nosferatu's power is great. You fool of a dwarf,' shouts Colum. 'If you don't stop this nonsense, I'll let Von Braggart kill you!' Colum concentrates once more. The air around the dwarf darkens until it is completely opaque, a shimmering sphere of magical pitch encasing Ferro.

As the darkness spell takes form, Fergel shouts at Ferro, 'You were about to put your axe through that clap-ridden tart! What do you think that would have done for HIS wenching days? Ah, besides, the swelling could only have done you good, from the reports I've heard about you! Come on, stop messing about and let's see what gold we can take home from this lot.'

From within the blackness, a dwarf roars in fury. 'What is this? Cowards! Show your faces and I'll strip them from your skulls!' The sound of Ferro's axe searching for a body to bite into can be heard.

'We're your comrades in arms,' replies Fergel, 'we fought together against the Athachs and the water elementals! I pulled you away from danger and tended your wounds! Remember?'

Retrieving his silver dagger, Von Braden squints into the darkness surrounding Ferro. 'I've a really bad feeling in the pit of my stomach, saying that perhaps our Ferro is stuck like this, until we slay this undead whore. Next time we meet, I plan to do just that!' As Ferro's bellows continue, Von Braden consults with Colum and Fergel. 'So, any ideas what to do with him?'

Like a fat cannonball, Ferro blasts out from the darkness. He smashes into Fergel, knocking the halfling halfway across the chamber. Fergel hits a priest of law hard, causing the undead being's legs to

shatter. Ferro draws both arms back and unleashes his throwing axes at Colum. Both weapons bounce off Colum's chest. Ferro utters a growl of hatred. 'Casting a spell won't save you!' He reaches for his battle axe.

Colum readies his spear. 'It looks like this calls for drastic measures!'

Fergel curses profusely. He drags himself out from under the fallen priest. Picking the biggest, smoothest stone he can find, he whirls his sling up to speed and lets fly, aiming for Ferro's temple in an attempt to knock him out cold. Fergel lets his slingshot fly. The stone knocks off Ferro's helmet. Ferro charges Colum. The halfling moves to a position where he can jump on Ferro if Colum trips him up. He keeps his sling going, just in case.

Colum angles his spear toward the ground in an effort to trip the maddened dwarf up. Instead, the spear's shaft travels between Ferro's shins, and is twisted sideways. Colum loses control over the spear, which spins out of his grip and spins across the floor, colliding with Gotha's throne.

Fergel leaps to push Ferro of course, but falls short, banging his chin hard on the floor. The halfling is momentarily stunned.

Ferro drives his battle axe into Colum's abdomen. Great gouts of blood spray from the wound. 'VICCTORRY!' Ferro pulls his axe from Colum's wound and raises it to strike another injury.

Where Colum once stood, the unholy image of the nosferatu Gotha now takes prominence. 'Gotha' clutches her abdomen which continues to pour with blood. Ferro skids to a stop, nearly falling over in his effort to avert his axe blow. 'By Kagyar's silver beard! What have I done?! Mistress, forgive me for my blunder... if you so wish it I will gladly hack my own head off in repentance!'

The magically-disguised Colum takes a swig of one of the potions. 'Put the axe down, Ferro Blackhelm.' The form of Gotha loses solidity and the chamber wall behind her can slowly be seen. As Colum fades, his shapeshifting power is negated and his true persona is revealed. All his clothing and equipment drop to the floor. Colum now floats like a phantom before the group.

Von Braden stares in awe at Colum's ghostly incarnation. 'Now, there's something you definitely do not see everyday!' He keeps his hand firmly on the hilt of his sword, ready to burst into action if need be.

Ferro glares at Fergel and Von Braden. 'Why do you turn to mist, Mistress? Do the halfling and the longshanks human threaten you?' Ferro swings to block the most direct route between Colum and the others. 'They'll feel my axe before they get any closer!'

Colum's voice can be 'heard' in the minds of Von Braden and Fergel. 'Well, that potion I drank failed miserably! I suspect the other potion will turn me back. We still have a problem with Ferro; I have no idea how to turn him back to his normal self. You may have to kill him or at least knock him out... and hurry up about it! I may still be able to die from this wound in this form.'

Colum's last mind-words are 'shouted' out, felt by the receivers as a pounding headache. A whispering 'voice' replaces it. 'Apologies; it seems

some of my demon heritage is establishing itself and I'm not sure how to control it ...' The thought-message ends.

Von Braden creeps towards Ferro, whose back is still turned, looking at the being he thought was his mistress. With the dwarf distracted, the mercenary bashes him on the back of the head with the pommel of his sword. 'Sorry about that, Ferro, my friend, but you're just too dangerous in this state.'

Ferro moans as he pitches headfirst onto the stone floor, bursting his bulbous nose. Blood begins to pool around his face.

'Tie him up,' thought-speaks the mage. 'When you're done, throw that last potion over me; I think it will make me corporeal again ...'

Von Braden picks up the last remaining potion. He unstops the cap. 'I pray this will do more good than ill.' With these words, the mercenary throws the contents of the polished, wooden bottle over Colum's spirit-form. The fluid flies across the air, through Colum, and splatters on the far stone wall. It begins its long descent to the floor. The group watches as the fluid reaches the intersection between wall and floor. The beads of liquid spread over the floor, draining into gullies between the flags. Colum remains in his non-corporeal state, unaffected by whatever magic the potion offered.

Behind the group, the Priests Of Law noisily begin to stir ...

Fergel curses under his breath and rolls away from the stirring priests. He rapidly rummages through his pack, pulling out his flint and steel. With shaking hands, he strikes the steel against the flint, lighting a torch. The flame takes hold and Fergel thrusts the torch before him. 'Back you devils ... or burn!'

The first Priest Fergel touches catches fire instantly, the dryness of its robe acting as an excellent wick. Two more Priests ignite and the remainder of the Priests begin to react. A door slides open behind the undead, allowing them to flee Gotha's courtroom. One by one, the Priests shamble from the room.

Von Braden ladles into the burning undead, following in Fergel's wake, chopping any he has torched into so much bony timber. Then, thrusting his sword through an enemy skull, he uses his sword and fireball combination as a make-shift torch, laughing like a maniac. 'Burn, you skeletal horrors! My, you're certainly ingenious Fergel, brains as well as bollocks! Just what the serving wench ordered!'

Colum floats about a foot above the floor, just behind Fergel and Von Braden. 'Good idea, Halfling; you need to try and revive Ferro and hope he's not still under the nosferatu's spell.' Colum pauses, considering. 'I suppose in this form I could go through the door and see what lies ahead ...'

Fergel indicates the door the priests have retreated temporarily through. 'Go ahead, Colum.' Fergel uses the ribcage of a fallen priest as a impromptu holder for his torch. He then turns his attention to Ferro. Putting his foot against Ferro's shoulder to prevent the dwarf from biting him, Fergel gently pats Ferro's face. 'Come on - wake up! The vampire-bitch has gone.'

Ferro returns to consciousness with a jolt. His eyes snap open to regard Fergel's fearful, worried face.

Von Braden smiles at the dwarf. 'Welcome back to the land of the living, my Dwarvish friend! Though it pains me to say it, you were possessed by that whore of a nosferatu, Gotha, and nearly done for all of us, so, I had to knock you out and hope that you would revert to your old-self! As things stand just now, you nearly cleaved poor old Colum in two! Look at his ghostly image! Look! He had to use that potion just to survive! However, it's good to have you back all the same. We've missed your axe!'

Ferro growls and swings a short but powerful arm around to clutch Fergel's leg. He pushes with all his might, hoping to displace the halfling and get free.

'OY!' Fergel loses his balance and falls backward.

Ferro snarls, spittle decorating his beard, the possessed dwarf kicks Fergel hard in the stomach, followed up by a scalp-tearing kick to his fuzzy-mop of a head. 'What's this?' bellows Ferro, angry, hurting and very confused. 'My friends, you say, and yet you openly assail me! The Goddess's wrath be on you!'

Ferro focuses his blurred vision and muddy mind on Von Braden, the human who had knocked him out with the pommel of his sword. 'And now for you, Von Braggart! A mighty warrior you style yourself, eh? Then let's fight!'

Fergel drags himself off the floor and runs across the room at Ferro, jumping on his back, pummeling him around the head in a fit of rage. His fists fall uselessly on Ferro's chainmail shirt. The dwarf tries to strike the halfling, but cannot turn to do so with the little Hin clinging tightly to his back. Fergel maintains his assault. 'I'll have you!'

Ferro throws the halfling. He turns and kicks Fergel in the head once again. 'GOAALL!' Fergel lies shuddering, his head pounding in agony, his body drained of strength.

Colum tries to cast a charm spell on Ferro, but in his ghostly state his powers are useless.

Von Braden rolls his eyes; a mix of dismay and regret. 'Here we go again!'

Ferro charges Von Braden. Before the human can defend himself, the dwarf's great-axe finds its mark in his chest! Ferro stumbles back, the red mist that had overtaken him passing as quickly as it had come. He looks in shock at his axe, still lodged in the mercenary's chest. Ferro backs off further, holding up his hands in front of him to attempt to calm down the obviously enraged Von Braden. 'You shouldn't have knocked me out! You should have remembered that dwarves don't take kindly to being rapped 'round the head with the pommel of a sword!'

Von Braden stares down in astonishment at the axe lodged in his midriff. His armour has taken some of the brunt of the blow, but the pain tells him all he needs to know. *There is a good chance I won't be getting out of this alive, but I'll be damned if I'm dying alone.* Trying to blot out the pain, Von Braden lunges forward with his sword, looking for an opening in Ferro's defence, secure in the knowledge that the enraged dwarf has lost his primary weapon.

Fergel shouts weakly from his prone position on the floor: 'Braden! Ferro! Stop before you kill each other!'

As Von Braden and Ferro prepare to meet in final battle, Von Braden suddenly doubles up. His legs lose their strength and he topples sideways into his flank, his hands clutching at his groin area. The sight of Von Braden fiddling with himself is enough to stop even Ferro's maddened advance. Von Braden's hands come away from his groin, which is now leaking blood through his trousers. Accompanying Von Braden's screams of uttermost agony, his groin begins to spasm. The trousers tear and something long and thin, coated in rich red blood begins to emerge!

Chapter 4

What struggles to be free of the mercenary's cock is a small, gnarled humanoid with dark, peaty skin, a wide mouth and slightly protruding eyes. A thin, untidy mane of strawlike hair travels down the creature's wrinkled scalp, down its neck to the tops of its spindly legs. The creature's pointed ears twitch and its long, pointed fingers flex as it attempts to reorientate itself.

Colum recognises the creature, 'A bog imp! They only inhabit the most dank and dirty swamps; it'd be right at home in your pants then, Von Braggart!'

His head pounding from the effort, Fergel scrambles across the floor and grabs the imp around the neck. 'Now then, my little friend, you're going to make my colleagues well again or I'll choke the life from you!'

The bog imp cocks its head at the diminutive attacker. It issues a cry similar to the yapping of a puppy and leaps out of Fergel's way, landing on the throne that was until recently occupied by Gotha. The imp spots the treasure chests. It dives into one of the caskets with both long arms, filling them with large jewellery. The imp begins to throw the valuables at Fergel, causing nasty cuts and bruises on exposed areas of his skin. Finally noticing Colum, the imp yaps with fear and begins pelting the mage's spectral image with impotent missiles.

Ferro takes a step closer to Von Braden's groin, an action that, until this moment, no dwarf of sound mind had never considered doing before. Ferro stares down at the imp. 'Can you help us then, spawn of Braden's loins? I hope for your sake you can, for I was about to cleave your host in two!'

The bog imp's eyes snap between Ferro and Colum as the little creature's slimy brain works to solve its dilemma. 'Ssstay away, Ssshort arssse!'

Fergel picks up one of the pieces of jewellery tossed at him and throws it back, aiming to knock out the cock-rendering beast. The imp easily avoids the halfling's attack. It leaps behind a glittering, golden shield taller than the imp. From behind the shield extends one of the imp's bony hands - and a two-fingered hand signal designed to ward off the imp's evil attackers.

Ferro grunts at Fergel. 'Make y'self useful and catch that thing! Someone as small as you should be able to fight it one on one.' Ferro turns his attention to the spectral Colum. 'Wizard - Demon - whatever you are - do you know if this bog-rot pixie can do anything of use? If it can, then tell us and we can make it. If not, grant me a chain and I'll make a pet of it!' Ferro leans against a wall, suddenly feeling the effects of his exhaustion. His leg is still agony to lean on. He pretends outwardly that he is tough, but on the inside he squirms with every short step he takes. Ferro hopes desperately that the imp can help alleviate his pain, but he is doubtful of the creature's abilities.

Colum is relieved, 'Ferro! Nice to have you back, I think, you beady beergut of a dwarf. All goblinoids have closer ties to the universe of the mystical than human and kinfolk; the bog imp's heightened senses may be of utility. Whatever end, I think it might be fun finding out how it came to be stuck in Braggart's genitals and as you say it will make a good pet. No? Just catch it then we can ask it.'

'Look who's back!' Fergel laughs nervously, hoping that Ferro's devotion to the nosferatu has passed. 'We can only hope his charm returns soon!' Fergel picks up a another precious stone, loading it into his sling this time. He sits up, spins his sling twice and fires, catching the imp a painful, debilitating blow in its little imp knackers.

Having dared leave the cover of the golden shield, the imp scurries across the chamber ... right into Fergel's line of fire. It yaps with pain as the sharp-edged stones slice welts into its mangy, peaty genitals. The bog imp curls up on the floor in pain, whimpering like a puppy kicked by its beloved master.

Fergel drags himself across to the beast and starts to pull on one of it's ears. 'Right, you little bastard. Heal us or I'm going to stuff Von Braden up your chuff and let him crawl out of your cock and see how you like it!'

The bog imp shrieks with anger at the halfling's actions, but it knows where its survival instincts are pointing it. 'Magic all around, Fooll! Only the blind cannot see it!' The bog imp's eyes pivot towards the treasure chests. 'You can have the magic, I'll have the gold, eh?''

Colum snarls at the imp, 'Look you infernal Imp, help us out or Ill let the dwarf chop you in two, or the halfling will cut your private off. The choice is yours!' Bargaining with an imp now; I am used to dealing with other of my kin, not some half-baked infernal being. 'If you help us, we'll let you go!'

The bog imp studies the ghostly Colum, his eyebrows twitching with consternation. He spits a goblet of flem at Fergel, plastering the halfling's forehead in pus green slime, before returning to the treasure chests. The imp extracts a small, metal bottle from one of the caskets. He holds it high in the air for the group to see. 'Easssy! Lotsss of goodiesss here, and Gimp the Imp can help everyone ... if they help Gimp ...'

'Let us place our demands on him,' says Ferro. 'Fergel; get the smelly gnome to cure your knob-rot. That should test it's powers to the full! If that works, I'll hazard the risk of the little creature working it's magic on my shattered bones.' Ferro points his axe-head at Gimp. 'You can have your share of the horde - all you can carry - if you can make us well enough to walk out of this dungeon alive ...' Ferro looks into the stockpile of treasure. 'If there is anything the imp can use from that horde, let him take it! But be aware! The same offer does not extend to the enemies of the Mistress!'

Gimp unearths four objects - three metal philtres and one ornate bowl. 'Theese will do you good,' Gimp burbles, 'but don't asssk me how ...'

Now then, you fetid little piss-pot,' begins Fergel, wiping the phlegm from his forehead, 'which of these items helps each of us? You say you don't know but I don't know that I believe you!'

Gimp throws the items over his shoulder. 'You don't want help? Your choice - now help Gimp get the gold out of here. The imp then finally bothers to examine his surroundings. 'Where isss Gimp?'

Shadows begin to stretch across the wall connecting the chamber to the corridor outside. The Priests Of Law are returning ...

Fergel aims a quick blow at Gimp, before turning his attention to the potions and the bowl. 'Fiddlesticks! I can't tell one from the other, except one's a bowl, of course ...'

'Act quickly you little fool!' shouts Colum, 'time runs too short for us!'

The first group of undead Priests round the corner, entering and reaching out for Von Braden.

'Fergel - just take a guess!' shouts Colum. 'Down one potion and give the other to Von Braggart. In the condition you and he is in, its got to help.' Colum directs his thoughts towards the bog imp. 'Listen to me, Gimp. I'm a powerful magic user; I could do with a friend. Help me out of this state and I'll assist you with gold and maybe I can help you again ...'

Ferro hears the scraping, rattling advance of the Priests of Law. He is overwhelmed with confusion; he half-remembers fighting these skeletal warriors before, but he feels the nightmare tug of allegiance to the Goddess. What way should he act? 'Aaarrgghhh! My mind twists and turns more than an eel in the cook-pot! There is nothing for it. I will have one of those potions!' Ferro snatches up one of the philtres. 'Gimp - will this heal my wounds - and my anguish?'

Gimp shrugs. 'I tell you they good. You take your chancesss, Ssshort Arssse.' Gimp then notices the skeletal, Hutaakan Priests. 'Bone Men! Save Gimp!'

Ferro unscrews the metal cap from one of the philtres and swallows it in one mouthful. Moment later, Ferro's image begins to fade, slowing as he assumes a smoky, intangible state similar to Colum Darken's own!

Fergel grabs the bowl and stuffs it in his sack. Picking up the two philtres, he moves swiftly across to Von Braden. Twisting the cap off, he pours the contents down the mercenary's throat. That done, Fergel quickly drinks the last of the philtres himself. He feels no immediate effect from the philtre.

Von Braden's eyes flutter open, finally, blessedly free of the constant pain that drove his mind into blackness. Strength rushes back to his aching limbs and his ruptured, blood-splattered genitals begin to knit themselves back together.

The Priests Of Law lift Von Braden from the ground and begin to remove him from the chamber. Their captive swears impotently, 'Oh, sod this! What does a nobleman have to do for a break around here?'

Fergel has got his flint and steel out, making fire: 'I love the smell of burning Priests in the morning!'

The Priests turn their attention on Fergel. They overpower the halfling and begin to carry him out of the chamber after the priests hoisting Von Braden. Despite some excellent shots with his sling, Fergel fails to disable any of the enemy, his ammunition bouncing off the undead like rain off a gabled roof. Fergel struggles in the bony grip of the

priests but soon realises that he can't escape. He relaxes in their grip to conserve his strength, wondering where they are taking him.

The priests and their living cargo slowly ascend a staircase lit by flickering braziers, leaving the two gaseous adventurers behind in Gotha's throne room.

Colum glides towards the ghostly Ferro, 'Erm, it looks like we're stuck like this together, my bearded friend. If you need to speak to the others I can pass on your messages. First things first: we need to get Braggart and Fergel and get out of here. Did you see that blasted Imp? Where did he go?'

Ferro spends a moment taking stock; on the plus side, his legs and ribs no longer hurt. On the negative side, he no longer HAS legs or ribs, or anything else, for that matter. Or an axe. He felt naked, and more than a bit silly to be a transparent, ethereal nonentity. Ferro turns his attention back to the activity occurring back in the physical world below him. Whilst Ferro had no great love for the halfling, he was still intrigued by what the skeletal guardians were up to. Ferro concentrates, trying to convince his spirit-form to follow the retreating priests. He quickly realises that a more direct route is open to him by passing through the stone walls of the dungeon. The action is at first disconcerting, but quickly enough Ferro passes through the walls, exiting into a warmly lit corridor whose own walls play theatre to the jerky movements of the priests' spindly shadows. Ferro floats on after the priests.

The priests ascend numerous staircases, passing dark corridors where many large, dark eyes watch their passing. Eventually, the procession enters a high-vaulted chamber where sunlight penetrates fallen roof stones, bridging the floor overgrown with wet foliage and the silhouetting roof with lemon-yellow rectangles of daylight. The priests take their prisoners into the centre of the chamber. There they halt. From the roof descends a creature of darkness. Gotha alights gently to the floor, her severed arm nearly regenerated. The nosferatu extends one of her bone-white fingers at Von Braden and Fergel. 'Bring them to me; I require nourishment!'

Von Braden moves his hand to the hilt of his silver dagger, then pretends to be limp and unconscious. *Oh, bugger this! I would love to have a seductive-looking bitch like this suck me dry, but not in the way she intends!*

Ferro drifts into the chamber, regarding the return of his mistress in awe. Her radiant, icy beauty numbs the spectral dwarf to the fact that his one-time travel companions are about to be siphoned of their lifeblood. Speaking involuntarily, audible only to his fellow spirit Colum, Ferro incants: 'The Goddess has arisen! My mistress, your servant, your Ferro, I am here! Please take my soul as your eternal protector!'

Gotha waves away the three Priests holding Fergel. 'I shall leave the runt for later; the blood of halflings taste like rotten cider.' She glides across toward the seemingly unconscious human mercenary, 'Yes. This one has spilt my blood; now I shall deprive him of his!'

Von Braden drives his silver dagger into Gotha's exposed neck. A blast of black ichor erupts from the nosferatu's wound, spraying Von Braden's face. Gotha grasps her throat with both hands, finding the hilt of the dagger and wrenching it from its resting place. The nosferatu retreats, snarling up black bubbles of mixed air and ichor, her eyes bulging fit to burst with pain and fury. The Priests turn as one on Von Braden, extending their staffs ...

Colum Darken's body returns to its original, solid state, oozing blood from Ferro's axe wound. He crashes to the floor in an instant. Feelings begin to return to his body and his wound resumes its pulsing leakage. Colum crawls around the treasure room looking for the potions that Gimp had mentioned, one hand pressing gingerly against this abdominal wound injury.

Gimp appears from behind a large silver vase. He grins amiably at the afflicted mage. 'You want Gimp to help you, yesss? Then you help Gimp firssst! Gimp needsss water to keep ssskin nice ... you piss on Gimp!'

'You smelly little dragon's fart!' shouts Colum. 'Is that how you managed to get into Braggart's genitals? I think I'll pass, Thank you.' Colum searches for the first available flask to drink. 'My associates are in trouble, they need my help. If you want our help, assist us and then we will share our wealth with you, and help you carry it out.'

Gimp lifts his head, sniffing the air. 'You rubbisssh! Gimp getsss wet from bigger cocksss than Mage'ssss maggot!' With that, Gimp runs from the chamber.

Colum casts a spell upon the treasure horde. 'Divine Magical! Slowly, a half-dozen spheres appear amid the valuables, marking the location of magically-enchanted items, some close to the surface of the treasure, other spheres denominating items buried deep within the pile.

A scream like a puppy caught in a bear-trap cuts through the silence, then it too is silenced.

Colum snatches up the magical items easiest to reach: a wand inlaid with ivory lightning bolt symbols, a blue and red-striped earring and a pair of well-used, dirty leather gauntlets. '*Suppose I have to help the others ...* he runs from the chamber, sweating in pain with every step. In the distance, from some unseen chamber, Colum hears many bodies in motion ...

Fergel struggles free of the Priests, his flint and steel still clenched firmly in his hand. He strikes the steel against the flint and watches gleefully as a shower of sparks sprays over the Priests. Their clothes smoulder and ignite, flames shooting up their dry, dusty cloaks, turning them into walking fireballs. While the Priests' clothing incinerates in seconds, the undead do not appear to be deterred. They advance on Fergel, flaming arms outstretched.

Fergel releases a primeval yell, sending stone after stone flying into the burning mass of undead, rewarded by the sound of cracking bones. 'There's something not right about these creeps!' he shouts at Von Braden, 'they're tougher than the last lot!'

Von Braden grins as he quickly moves his hand to his sword, drawing it and bringing it to bear on the priests. 'Something not right? They're dead! How right is that? Come on, you infernal creatures! Let's finish it!'

Rolling away from the slow-moving zombies, Von Braden stands carefully, involuntarily mindful of the considerable pain still present in his loins. 'How was that for you, Suck-Hag?' he shouts at Gotha, 'I must say it left me as hard as a broomstick! Hahhahhaa!' Von Braden hacks the head from the nearest Priest and kicks the rest of its body against another priest. The headless corpse falls, while the other walks over it to get at its attacker.

Ferro looks on as Von Braden brags about harming his mistress. The spectral dwarf screams a battle cry and launches himself at the human warrior, but his attack - and screams - exist only in the spirit world. All the blood-soaked swordsman feels is a slight breeze that passes almost completely unnoticed.

Von Braden draws his second sword, bringing it together with his other weapon to ignite an explosive display of undead slaughter. Bested before by the Priests from lack of manoeuvring space in the narrow temple corridors, here, in the wide open space of the chamber, the mercenary now delivers decapitation after decapitation, bridged by high leaps and somersaults.

Fergel is ecstatic with the drama: 'Yess! Better than shooting crows over Tippyripple Meadow!' Fleet of [big] foot, the halfling dodges among the priests and pile-drives through them, his low centre of gravity turning him into a stunted cannonball. Eventually, Fergel's injuries begin to impede his ability and he falls, panting heavily for breath, against a toppled stone column. Two Priests prod Fergel with their staffs, inducing a state of unconsciousness in the beleaguered Hin.

Von Braden falls to his knees, surrounded by a field of rotten and shattered bones. He is glazed with sweat, his tunic glued to his back. His long hair sticks to his face and catches in his foam-flecked mouth. He rests for a moment as a blaze of stars cascades through his vision. Turning his sword-point facedown, Von Braden pushes himself back up onto his feet. He spares a moment to recognise the gaseous form hovering close by of Ferro Blackhelm, before searching for his final quarry - Gotha.

A fall of stonework alerts Von Braden to Gotha's rapid, spider-like ascent up the chamber wall. The nosferatu climbs with superhuman speed, before launching from the wall and swapping her form for that of a bat. The winged horror climbs high, escaping through one of the holes in the chamber's roof, screeching with a bestial anger.

Von Braden scoops up the discarded silver dagger. He then moves towards Fergel, fighting off the remaining Priests. 'Back, you devils! Back! You won't touch him! This little halfling is worth a thousand of your sort! Stout of heart and stiff of cock, but not from personal experience! By thunder, you won't lay one bony finger on him!' To emphasise his point,

the sweat-soaked mercenary lunges out with his flashing blades and cuts the arms from the two staff-wielding Priests, before swinging his swords round and decapitating them both. The last two Priests Of Law collapse in two, clattering piles.

With some assistance from Von Braden's boot, Fergel begins to stir, vomiting on Von Braden's boots. Spitting and blowing stray bits of chunder from his nose, he drags himself upright. Fergel sways as he pushes his vomit flecked hair from his face. 'Right then, where did the vampire bitch go?' He pauses and looks again at the mercenary. 'You stink, Von Braden! What the hell have you been bathing in?'

'My own piss and shit, by the smell of it!' replies Von Braden. 'I suppose when you have a bog imp burst from your Old Boy, you must shit yourself automatically! Though how the little bastard got there, I am just dying to know! Speaking of which, where is the little runt?'

Fergel has no answer. 'He didn't come with us; must have hidden in the treasure room ... and I can't blame him.'

The two adventurers and the wispy entity that is Ferro Blackhelm survey their surroundings. The ruins are now quiet and still. The chamber is accessible by two sets of heavy doors, their brass frames shaped like truncated triangles cut in half down their length by two doors. Both sets of doors are damaged, as though driven in by massive fists. The inner door connects to an unlit corridor leading back into the temple, while the outer is a true exit into the forests of the Black Peak Mountains. Birdsong breaks the silence, setting up a chorus that races across the tall trees overlooking the chamber roof, allowing sunlight to dapple the floor.

Colum fits the earring to his ear, tucks the gauntlet into his belt and places the wand in his boot. He then quietly investigates the noises heard moments earlier from nearby but as yet unseen sections of the temple ...

Ferro crashes to the ground. His armour clatters as he hits the stone floor, and, luckily for the dwarf, his head breaks his fall, fortunately missing any vital or delicate parts of his body. Ferro takes a quick stock of himself; he is still in pain, and he is still angry.

Fergel eyes Ferro cautiously. 'How are you feeling? Still in thrall to Gotha?'

Ferro is furious. 'Von Braden! That was not a wise move - my mistress is a vengeful and powerful lady. You have signed your own death certificate - though it will not be my place to take your life. Gotha herself will return to suck your body dry of its poisonous blood.' Ferro is clearly still under Gotha's nefarious control. The dwarf, however, is completely unaware of the spell and believes that he is acting in the group's best interests when he defends the woman he sees as a powerful yet just queen.

Von Braden rolls his eyes in his characteristic way. 'I acted purely in defence, my friend, though I'm sure I will take this matter up

personally with your mistress at a not too distant date, where we can safely iron out this obvious misunderstanding. In the meantime, let us reunite with Darken, and find this crotch-bursting blackguard of the highest order!

Down several darkened corridors Colum ventures, his way made clear only by his inhuman senses. He hunts the makers of the noises that float heavily before him. At length, the stench of faeces and rotten food pickles Colum's sensitive nostrils, growing in intensity as he crosses a dusty, warm corridor. The noises grow louder and more clear, now obviously the product of a group of creatures. Colum strains to make sense of the guttural words that accompany the sounds of heavy clothing and metal being rubbed together, the sounds of bodies in motion.

'So wharr do yu fink then?'

'About whar?'

'The Mistress? Where she gon then?'

'Feeding time; don care where as long as we leave alone!' There comes the sound of massed laughter in agreement ...

Chapter 5

Colum stops and considers. He could attack the unknown beings in the chamber, but his stomach is weeping blood from Ferro's axe wound. He slowly backs off and retraces his steps to find Von Braden and Fergel.

Fergel returns to Gotha's treasure room. 'Where did Colum disappear to?' He draws his sling. 'More to the point, where's Gimp? Here little Gimp, Fergel's got something for you!'

By chance, Colum finds his way back into the very same corridor that Von Baden and Ferro are striding down. 'Well met, friends; have any of you got any healing magic? And how's that small dwarf now? any better?' Colum avoids looking at Ferro. 'Anyway, I found this and thought you could use them, Braggart?' Colum hands the gauntlets to the nobleman. 'A piece offering of sorts. So what next, Fearless Leader? *URK!*' Colum collapses onto his knees, holding his bleeding stomach in pain.

Von Braden sakes his head. 'By Halav, Mage, you're a sorry sight! 'We'd best hold him down and get that wound bound. Fergel, perhaps you should be the one to do it as my arm's still not fully functional and I might cause him more harm than good! I don't think he'd want our Dwarvish friend anywhere near it. 'Look on the bright side, Darken; at least you're no longer floating around like a gaseous fart! Chin up, old boy!' Von Braden slides the gauntlets over his hands. He experiences no ill-effects.

Fergel stuffs his sling in his pocket and turns his attention to Colum. 'Hmm! It's quite a deep wound.' The halfling pokes around the wound opening; seemingly oblivious to Colum's discomfort. 'Come here, Von Braden - I need some of that fine cloth from around your shoulders to bind the wound. I heard somewhere that binding helps to prevent the wound turning bad - or was it cauterisation? I tell you what, shall we try the binding first?'

Von Braden considers his once fine garments, now streaked with mud, blood, and puss. He rips off one of the cleaner parts of his cape and hands it over to Fergel. 'There you go, my friend. In their current condition, these once fine clothes are definitely soooo yesterday!'

Ferro knows little of healing or other such trickery. He waits whilst the humans mend their wounds. Fragile and weak-willed creatures, he thinks, oblivious to that fact that he is himself under a spell.

'Now, where oh where is that ...' Von Braden is about to say 'vampire-whore' but stops short because of Ferro's ominous presence, '... Lady of the dungeon hiding? Methinks we should find her and straighten

this entire thing out.' Unseen by Ferro, Von Braden gives a knowing wink to Fergel and Colum.

Surrounding Gotha's throne are containers of all descriptions, overflowing with treasure. It appears that the treasure was brought into the throne room and piled into the containers, valuables plundered from Hutaakan vaults deeper in the temple. Most items are covered in gold and silver patterns, making it difficult for Fergel to discern which are basically silver, or are just gold treasures with silver markings. Half-blind with greed, the nifty-fingered halfling fails to notice the vaguely human shadows loping down the corridor towards him. At the last moment, he hears heavy breathing, causing Fergel to turn in fright ...

Goblins!

The goblins dive on Fergel, overpowering him. One throws a dirty, matted net over the halfling while others kick him in the head.

'Git the little sod!'

'Argh! He bit my finky! Lemme at 'im, I'll make a necklace of his teeth!'

'You bastards!' shouts Fergel as he struggles in the net. He manages to get a foot free and lashes out behind him, hearing a loud crack and a scream as he connects with a goblin shinbone.

Further down the corridor, the other adventurers saunter towards the treasure room. They hear the commotion. Colum quickly rushes forward. 'Braggart, that Fergel has managed to get himself in trouble again. Get those bloody swords out and see if Ferro can be bothered attacking something that isn't one of us!' Colum grimaces in pain. He concentrates in his hands and his fingernails extend into ivory razors. Colum leaps towards the goblins, a maniacal grin on his face joined by a mad laugh.

There are seven goblins, one hopping about, clutching his shin in response to Fergel's ferocious kick. The other six gawp at the mage on fast approach who appears to be nothing more than a bag of bones, emaciated sword fodder.

'Letts be 'avin' yu!' They scream through deformed mouths, but soon it is they who are being had as the inhuman mage slices into their midst, rending rough flesh and animal skin hides!

Ferro - as a dwarf - has an instinctive hatred of the stunted, thieving green murderers. As has happened many times in his short life before, the red mist descends: 'WAAAARRRRRRGGGGHHHHH!' Ferro swings his great axe, taking massive swipes at the goblins. He has reached a nirvana of Dwarvish emotion; the berserk rage. With no heed for defence or self-preservation, he aims to destroy the goblins - single-handedly if necessary. Ferro's first blow cleaves a goblin in two, spraying its comrades with sickly pink blood and plastering Ferro's beard. Spitting through reddened teeth, Ferro roars at the splattered goblins who tremble, filling their pants with stinking bodily excrement.

Von Braden draws his sword with his favoured arm and charges into the fray. A goblin's head flies off its shoulders and two more lose their sword-arms. Von Braden completes a series of wide and powerful swings. Goblin bodies and body parts bounce along the ground, leaving red trails.

Within seconds the battle is ended. Only two goblins survive, one deprived of its arm, the other trembling like a pipeweed addict. The latter goblin points at the one-armed comrade. 'He made he kick der halfling! I ain' got noothin' 'ginst 'im!'

White-faced in anger, Fergel struggles free of the net and marches up to the cowering goblin. 'Kick me would you, you little runt?' Ferro aims an almighty kick at the goblin's groin, propelling the creature into an unconscious heap on the floor.

Von Braden runs the foul creature through, 'And I've got nothing against you, Little Fellow! Nothing personal!'

Drawing his sword, Ferro turns to the one-armed goblin. 'Right then my short friend, we're going to have a little chat and if you don't tell me what I want to know, you're going to start losing other limbs as well! Where did you lot come from and have you seen an imp that answers to the name of Gimp? We've got some catching up to do!'

The goblin shudders as the stocky dwarf fixes him with a menacing, fat-faced snarl. 'We - we all live 'ere don't we? Got the run of the place until the Mistress show up. She nice to gobbos and lets us stay, 'long as we all do wot she wantsuz to.' The goblin ventures a smile at Ferro. 'We got your little friend too...the screaming black bastard? Ain't fit to gobble it ain't!'

Colum looks down at his bloodied hands. It seems that being of demonic descent has its advantages. Claws and close combat was not something he had trained to do, but it had all come to him rather easily. Colum lifted his shirt to pursue another theory. To his surprise, the axe-wound created by Ferro was now a thin red scar, almost fully-healed. 'Now that's something you don't see everyday!' Colum gasped as he ran his hand along the scar.

'I suppose you better show us to where you're keeping the little bastard,' says Von Braden, 'I've most definitely a bone to pick with him!'

The goblin points the way ahead. 'Ees down here, in our shack. You tuff geezers, you git a hot hello an' some grub!'

The adventurers follow the goblin down numerous corridors bedecked with faded Hutaakan splendour. Turning the corner into a large chamber reveals Gimp the Imp, strapped to a wooden wheel and scored with knife wounds. Dozens of pairs of eyes - an entire goblin tribe! - turn from the act of torture and their slimy food to fix upon the newcomers.

Von Braden puts on his most courageous and confident expression, and smiles at the entourage. 'Hello there! Now why don't you fine fellow release this little dung-pile into our company, and we'll be gone from your homely abode as soon as possible, eh? Best all-round if you do so, chaps, believe me.'

Ferro eyes the goblins cautiously; a few moments earlier he and his group had been splitting the greenies in two, and now they were being welcomed into the tribe? Even to Ferro's slow Dwarvish mind, this didn't

make sense. 'Von Braden, grab the imp and let's be gone! We still have business to complete in these halls, and I for one cannot understand these goblins' friendliness. Let us leave here, with Gimp if we must, and fill our pockets with jewels and gold! Then we can attend our other business.' Ferro is wary; he hand never moves far from the hilt of his great-axe, and his beady eyes dart from side to side, awaiting the first sign of treachery from the pus-filled green-skins.

Fergel lets his sling slip down his sleeve until it cradles in his palm. "Let's grab your knob-dwelling friend and leave, Von Braden!"

The massed goblins begin to surge forward, unsheathing their various weapons ...

'STAYYYY!'

The goblins halt, scowling in confusion. Somewhere in the midst of the enemy, orders are given loudly. A space appears in the goblins' ranks, widening to reveal a goblin taller and stockier than the rest. A deep red fur cloak sits uneasily on his shoulders and his breeches are fashioned of finer silks than any goblin has a right to claim as his own. The half-skull of a Athach sits lopsided on his wide, flat scalp, not entirely cleansed of dry brain fluid. The goblin studies the adventurers, drooling, his yellow saliva dripping onto the dusty floor. He lopes forwards and something grows along his cheek. No, not grows so much as opens - a third red eye, larger than his existing pair, a curious shade of purple.

'Yu not friends of Gotha ... not no why yu beer. Tell Thri now!'

A goblin close to the larger goblin points his rusting sword at the adventurers. 'Yu def? King Thri speaks to yu! ANSWERRR!' The goblin's order is backed up by a resumption of promised hostilities from the other assembled goblins who fidget with anticipation of the slaughter that may be soon to begin.

Von Braden smiles at the goblin that spoke and shrugs, gesturing towards Gimp's strung-up form. 'We've a bone to pick with that little fellow. Let us have him, oh mighty King of the Goblins, and there's no problem. I certainly don't have any quarrel with your mighty tribe.'

Colum whispers behind Von Braden. 'Take care; they have a shaman with them. He can read intent, as can I.'

King Thri rubs his hairy chin in thought, a comical sight if not for the wall of sharp weapons on either wide of him, flexing in feverish desire at the thought of decapitating the adventurers. The king gestures towards a shorter goblin, dressed unlike any of the others of the tribe. The two confer. Thri returns his gaze towards Von Braden. 'Rip the imp off an' chuk 'im to a 'uman.'

Two goblins cut Gimp's bonds. The creature runs towards Fergel, leaping to embrace the halfling. 'Yesss! Friendsss! Help Gimp find bog, Gimp help friendsss find treassure!'

'NO!' roars King Thri. 'Leev heer now an' live.. stay an' ...' Thri gestures, making a slicing motion across his neck.

'My, what a wise and mighty monarch you are! We'll do just that.' Von Braden begins to edge out of the chamber, bowing as he goes. 'Come along, chaps!'

His eyes watering from the fetid bell-end stench of Gimp, Fergel manages to cough. 'I agree, let's get out of here. Oh, and Von Braden, if your old man smells this bad, you need to seek help!'

'Duplicity on the part of these simpleton creatures is beyond their capability for now,' counsels Colum. 'We have placed them in a puzzling situation which taxes their meagre brain fibres to new limits. I suggest we make haste and leave this place, to return to civilisation whilst we still enjoy their good graces.'

The adventurers put a good number of corridors between themselves and King Thri's tribe. Ferro observes they are being followed: 'A small number of the swine have followed us, but they have sense enough to keep beyond the range of my throwing axes.'

'They are curious, but not that stupid, Dwarf,' speaks Colum. 'Does anybody have an inkling where we are? I do not recognise this stretch of corridor, and those double-doors at its end - we have never opened them.'

Ferro studies the double-doors. 'Those doors do not belong here. They're made by Manfolk. You can tell by the substandard hinges. Sorry, Von Braden!'

'No offence taken, my good man. I know that we lowly longshanks are quite limited in our carpentry skills, and the like. Let's investigate. Since you're the expert, Ferro, why don't you take pride of place up front?' As they move forward, Von Braden can't resist a wry grin to Fergel, unseen by the grumbling dwarf.

'Here, hold the runt"', says Fergel as he disentangles himself from Gimp and passes the fetid imp to Von Braden. 'Keep an eye on those gobbos and I'll take a closer look at the door'.

Von Braden leers down at Gimp. 'Hello, little fellow. Mind telling me how you got inside my Old Boy?'

Gimp rubs his strawlike hair in agitation. 'Gimp not know how he fit into your pink worm... sssleeping in bog, then ssscreaming in sssmelly, wet tunnel, then Gimp free!' Gimp looks up at Von Braden with a hopeful smile. 'Big Man piss on Gimp, make Gimp'sss ssskin happy?'

Von Braden gives an incredulous look and then finally grins again, keeping up appearances. 'Maybe later,' he says to the disgusting little creature.

Ferro inspects the doors more closely, assisted by Fergel. The roughly-hewn timber and poorly-cast iron of the locks and hinges are evidence of Human engineering. Ferro casts his expert eye over the locks and hinges, studying them in detail to see if they are locked before he tries opening them; he is wary the doors might well be booby-trapped. The doors appear to be fastened, but are unlocked. Ferro pushes the doors open.

The two doors swing slowly away, revealing a wide corridor beyond. The first, most obvious difference to the corridors of the temple you have thus far traversed is the presence of other humans, six in total. Four stand not twenty feet from the doorway, two to a wall. They are dressed in plate-armour and heft swords in their gloved hands. Colourful outlines of a sailing ship and upturned sword decorate their tabards. Two more dressed in the same attire face the doorway from the far side of the

corridor, standing side by side beneath a small, rectangle window, illuminated by daylight.

The humans turn in your direction on hearing the doors open. Their eyes dilate in fright. 'By the Duke!' Fright swiftly turns to anger, and the necessity of duty. The four soldiers charge you, followed at distance by their colleagues below the window.

Von Braden recognises the men as members of Duke Stefan Karameikos's palace guard. He raises his hand and calls out. 'Wait! No, merry fellows - we are not denizens from the deep! ALL HAIL DUKE KARAMEIKOS!'

Von Braden's words cause the attackers to slow their pace, until one guard recharges his colleague's spirits. 'No! Ignore the fiend's lies! Don't forget what Ragemor taught us ... nothing good can be spawned in that tomb! Let your guards down and their claws will part your flesh to ribbons! ATTACK!'

Von Braden draws his swords. 'If I cannot convince you further, I can at least defend myself!'

One of the guards pushes Fergel back against the mercenary. It is the opening another guard requires to cut deeply into Von Braden's flank. Blood chokes the sword blade before bubbling forth through air and over Fergel's mop of mahogany hair. The guard who wounded Von Braden pulls his blade free, seeking to bring it to bear once more on the human 'imposter' and end his life.

Another guard attacks Ferro. The dwarf's great-axe catches the blade. Ferro flexes his muscles and turns the weapon aside.

Colum casts a pulsating missile at the guards. The soldiers throw themselves out of the missile's deadly path. It explodes in a shower of golden sparks against a wall.

Von Braden swings wildly at his attacker, but his reflexes are stifled by his searing injury. The guard grins with a confident prediction of victory. He sidesteps Von Braden's uncertain strike and slices deeply into the mercenary's neck. Von Braden's chattering head flies from his shoulders, bouncing off the doors that have closed behind him! The fallen mercenary's ghostly voice breaks through the wall of death for the first and final time: 'AVENGE ME, MY MERRY FELLOWS!'

***One Comrade Is Lost And One Possessed By Evil,
But Even Greater Peril Lies Ahead!***

To Be Continued In ...

The Heart Of Halav